



ACTION

STORIES

OCTOBER
20c

TRADE MARK REG.

THE
WORLD'S BEST
FAST-MOVING FICTION
ADVENTURE
WESTERN
JUNGLE

SIX-GUNS
and
BARBWIRE

by
ROLLIN
BROWN

BUSHWHACK
RANGE

by
J. E. GRINSTEAD

BURKS
WETJEN
COOPER



ALLEN
ANDERSON



BOB WAS FOOLED . . . he thought he could get rid of those distressing flakes and scales with one application of some overnight remedy. He found, however, that it required persistent treatment, and used Listerine Antiseptic and massage twice daily to fight the condition. Now his scalp feels "like a million."



AND SO WAS MRS. K . . . she had blamed her itching, irritated scalp on reducing and changing her diet. Then an advertisement suggested that the condition might be the infectious type of dandruff. "It's simply wonderful," she says, "how Listerine Antiseptic and massage helped me."

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IT MAY BE **INFECTIOUS DANDRUFF!**

AND in the infectious type of dandruff millions of germs are active on your scalp. Now, isn't it sensible to fight an infection with a treatment that *kills germs*? Listerine Antiseptic and massage, the *tested* treatment, does just that—and often brings wonderful improvement! When you massage Listerine onto your scalp, millions of germs associated with infectious dandruff are literally "blitzed" to death.

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Even large numbers of *Pityrosporum ovale*, the stubborn "bottle bacillus" which many leading authorities recognize as a causative agent of infectious dandruff, are destroyed by Listerine's quick, germ-killing action!

The Listerine Antiseptic treatment

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showed complete disappearance of, or marked improvement in, the symptoms within a month!

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LAMBERT PHARMACAL CO., St. Louis, Mo.

LISTERINE ANTISEPTIC

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ACTION STORIES

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MALCOLM REISS, Editor

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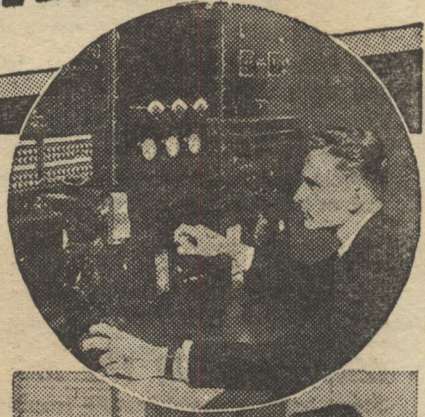
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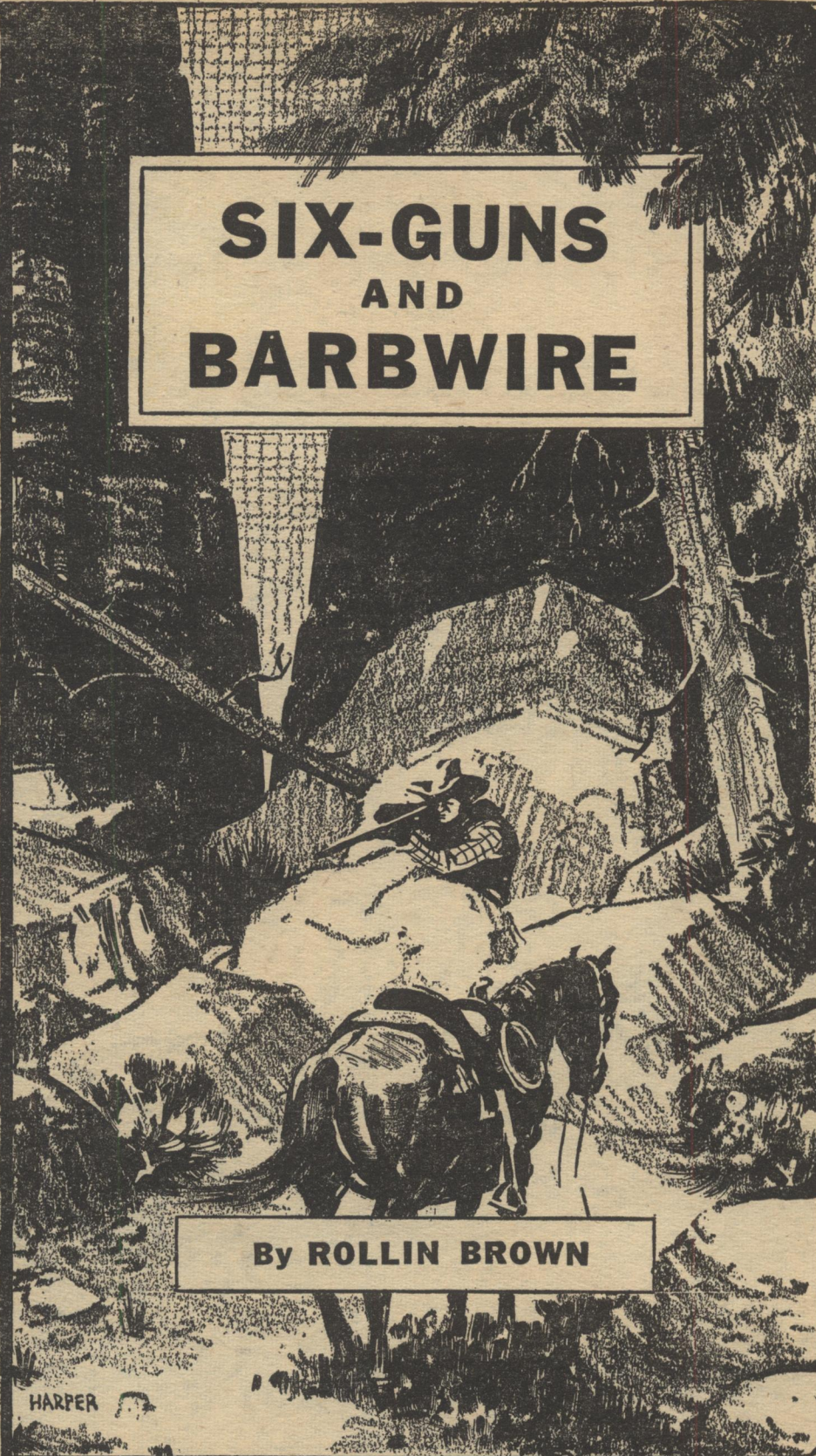
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**SIX-GUNS
AND
BARBWIRE**

By ROLLIN BROWN

HARPER

SIX-GUNS AND BARBWIRE

By Rollin Brown

Six-gun murder ran wild along Skull Creek. But trouble-trained Jeff Raines read the slaughter sign, dealt himself in, and took the blood-trail that led straight to Boot Hill.

A Complete Western Novel

FORTY miles of steady riding lay behind Jeff Raines that sundown, and with dusk thickening across the land he swung aside from the main, well-trav-

eled road he followed and climbed into the higher pines. Above him stood the opening of the gap, edged with its huge sentinel rocks, and through this hollow he





Harper

could see the farther, snow-covered peaks of the Bandillera range, still tinted with the sunset's afterglow. But riding higher on the timbered slope, Raines' attention lingered on Skull Creek and the road he had left. Below him now the road crossed the creek with a wooden bridge and, two or three miles distant, he could make out the town of Capwall, deep-shadowed under the rising hills.

Raines had his own reasons for delaying his entrance into that town till next daylight. He was a big man in the saddle, tall and rangy with a rugged power in the width of his shoulders and lean frame. He wore a pair of old barrel-leg chaps and a mackinaw, and under the wide brim of his hat, his face was like the rest of him, strongly-boned and formed, the mouth long-lipped with small-set creases at the corners and his eyes a clear blue-gray. Five days back at Cold-water Crossing, Raines had picked up first rumor of range trouble building at the Capwall and turned his horse this way.

Today he had passed two tarpaulin-covered wagons hauling in along the Skull Creek road, and made his own shrewd guess at what those loads contained. Trouble meant a job for the sort of man he was—gunman's hire, in so many words. Since the Santiago and the long, bitter months of struggle there which had ended in defeat and set him on the drift again, Jeff Raines had pretended nothing else, to himself or another. All the old hopes and ambitions of three and four years ago had been burned out of him in that; and word that Bill Striker had a hand in what was happening here was enough to show him how the wind blew. Striker would be after a big stake from this with all the odds stacked on his side. And so when he rode into that town ahead, Raines wanted daylight with him.

He was still close enough to the road below to hear the racket of a running horse crossing the wooden bridge over the creek. Raines stopped his mount, and in a moment saw that other rider's dust creeping up among the pines where the man had struck off into some side trail for the open gap above. At a distance the rider crossed a clearing in the half-light, leaned low over the saddle, the

gray horse he rode taking the slope at a labored run. This, too, fitted into that pattern of trouble Jeff Raines had seen elsewhere and knew so well; and he listened to the hoof-sounds fading off before he turned and climbed on into the higher timber, searching for a spot to make his camp.

It was nearly dark when he came on a trickle of water in one of the upper ravines and swung down wearily, removing the bit for his mount to drink. In the blanket roll behind saddle he carried a coffee pot and skillet and enough grub for a meal or two. Raines stumbled around in the dark, searching for firewood, and kindled a small blaze. He had returned to the water to fill the coffee pot and start it heating on the fire when he caught sight of the light above.

Three or four minutes ago, when he had watered his horse, the light hadn't been there. But now the door of some shack or cabin, close along the ravine above, stood wide, throwing a yellow rectangle of lamplight into the night. Raines studied it a while, uncertain whether to move his camp to the solitude of farther timber or seek shelter at the habitation above. The difficulty of finding another camping spot after dark decided him. He carried the coffee pot back to his fire, drenched the blaze and rolled his stuff. He had not yet pulled saddle off or staked his horse for the night. He tied the roll behind cantle once more and climbed the low side of the draw till the light showed due ahead.

THE cabin sat on the edge of a small, open bench above the ravine, and a fleabit gray horse, streaked with sweat and lather, stood close against the doorway light. There was a second horse, stamping and cropping the dry grass of the clearing's edge at a little distance. Raines called toward the cabin, and listened to the lengthening drag of silence that followed.

There was no movement in the place. From where he had stopped he could see a lamp with a sooty, dirt-streaked chimney burning on a rough home-made table in the center of the cabin's single room. After a moment Raines got

down from the saddle. The fleabit gray was evidently the same horse he had seen climbing the gap trail at a run; the animal stood with its head down, utterly spent and weary now. The other horse kept stirring along the side of the clearing, working at the dry grass. That was the only sound.

Raines stepped inside the cabin door, and stopped.

The next step he took carried him swiftly to one side, out of that frame of doorway light. There was a bunk in the far corner of the room with a man's booted foot and one arm hanging over its low edge to the floor. Raines stood motionless, backed against the wall inside the door. A heavy coat that the man had apparently worn lay on the floor near the bunk. The coat and one side of the man's flannel shirt were stained with blood. His eyes were open, staring at the roof above, but before he moved any nearer Raines knew that man was dead.

There was a mat of old pine boughs on the bunk under him, but no bedding, no sign that this room had been lived in recently, except for that soot-streaked lamp burning on the table. An accumulation of dust was thick over everything, and a few cans of provision on a shelf above the stove were rusted and discolored. The stovepipe which went up through the shake roof above had sagged and buckled so that it leaned over against the wall. On the floor inside the door was a spot of blood, and near the coat lay a crumpled buckskin riding glove.

Just then Raines caught the soft creak of saddle leather from the yard outside. He whirled, starting back toward the door, and heard that horse at the clearing's edge moving off at a cautious walk. As he reached the door and dove through the light, the animal broke away at a run for the timber, and Raines knew a rider sat the saddle. Presently he went back into the cabin.

A bullet had killed the man on the bunk, but it was plain that he had ridden some distance after the shot was fired. Someone had either met him here at the cabin or followed and helped him inside before he died, and that same rider had now fled. This was the way

he pieced things together. The dead man's face was lean and narrow, covered with a stubble of dark, wiry beard. Raines took up the heavy coat from the floor and went through its pockets, finding only tobacco and pipe and a loose handful of .30-30 rifle shells. There was no rifle in the room or on the gray's saddle. He reached for the buckskin glove.

It was a woman's glove, too small to fit any rangeman's hand, with a fancy-stitched and fringed gauntlet. Raines held the glove, looking at it, while some new sense of warning grew insistently strong in him. He flattened suddenly back against the cabin wall.

He was standing thus when a husky-throated voice carried in across the clearing: "All right; that's Anse's horse! You, Clegg, swing around the other way and watch that side." Hoofs followed fast across the open ground with one horse crashing around through the brush behind. Raines hugged the wall, reached the corner near the door. He was still holding the glove in one hand. He stopped, thrust the glove into a pocket, and opened the front of his mackinaw so that the holstered gun at his hip could be reached with a single motion. But he did not draw it. The long line of his mouth drew tight against his teeth.

Two or three riders stopped in front of the cabin now. He knew that his own mount had been seen. The heavy-throated voice said, "Grab that animal!" A boot struck the doorstep, stopped, and for a moment waited there.

Raines tensed.

THE man outside came in with one long stride that wheeled him around immediately at sight of Raines. He was broad and deep-chested with a flat, raw-burned face that Jeff Raines had seen before and remembered in every detail. The man's shoulders hunched, gun held close against his side, while a second rider crowded into the doorway at his heels and brought the muzzle of his gun to bear on Raines. Raines' two hands rested at his sides, the pressure of his arms holding the mackinaw open.

Raines let ten seconds of silence pass before he said, almost casually, "Howdy,

Bowie. Didn't know you were over in this end of the country. Playin' the game with Striker?"

The deep-chested man drew a slow breath into his lungs and watched Raines with an undivided attention. "What's your own explanation?"

"Small world, that's all," Raines said. "But don't get any notions, Bowie. I just happened to ride up this slope from the creek, lookin' for a place to spend the night." He made a motion with his head toward the dead man on the bunk. "It's no business of mine. I was aimin' to move on again pronto when you come ridin' in."

Bowie French shook his head. "It won't do. There's a town yonder, two-three miles along the creek road."

"Uh-huh, so I know. I heard it was Bill Striker's headquarters. So tomorrow, come daylight, it was my plan to ride into that town and have a look around."

French said, "It's a long way from the Santiago, Jeff. Been eight-ten months since the break-up there." The rasp came back into his voice. "It looks damn' funny. You already workin' for somebody here?"

"Nobody—not till I know more than I do now. I told you, Bowie," Raines said quietly, "not to get any notions."

Some of the tension went out of French's broad, thick-set body. He turned and called through the door to another rider outside: "Take a look at his horse. See what's in the blanket roll." He walked on across the room to the bunk and for a moment stood there, looking down at the dead man. The other rider in the room kept his place by the door. French ran his hands over the dead man's clothing, picked up the coat from the floor and went through it carefully, and then turned his attention to the room. He said to the man in the doorway, "Anse ain't been livin' here. That's certain."

The rider outside lifted his voice: "Nothin' in the blanket roll, except some grub, a coffee pot and skillet."

French swung around toward Raines. "Who lit the lamp in here?"

Raines shrugged. "I wouldn't know. You packin' a star in this, French?"

"Deputy," Bowie French said, and grinned twistedly. "Striker's got some influence out at the countyseat—enough to get me appointed. He ain't the kind of a man to leave a lot to chance; maybe you remember. It's a nice set-up he's got in here, Jeff. Was you aimin' now to get yourself a job with Bill Striker?"

Raines said, "It all depends. First I was plannin' to look around some and then make up my mind, like I told you. Maybe I'll drift again."

French shook his big, flat-faced head. "I wouldn't figure Striker would like that, Jeff, not after this. The important thing is to play along with the winner's side; that means along with Striker. I'll speak a word for you. He can use another man. Don't make the kind of a mistake you did in the Santiago."

French stepped into the door and raised his heavy voice again. "Clegg!" he called.

A horse came in alongside the cabin and a fourth rider swung down there and stepped into the light. He was slim and lithe with a youthful, almost womanish face and tow-yellow hair that showed, neatly combed, under the brim of a flat-crowned, black hat. Only his eyes were old and hard as bits of broken glass. In one glance they took in the room and lingered on Raines with a narrow, speculative appraisal, but no curiosity. In heavy holsters he wore two guns and his hands, as though from continual habit, kept idly stroking the polished holster leather while he waited for French to speak.

"You look after things here, Clegg," French told him. "I'll be back from town inside an hour."

French motioned for Raines to go ahead and followed him through the door. The rider left in the yard outside stood beside Raines' mount, re-tying his blanket roll behind cante. French climbed on a tall bay, waiting for Raines to swing into saddle, and then led the way out across the clearing to the west, following some dim path into the timber which presently led them into the steep, dusty trail from the gap. French struck a long, hard trot down the slope.

Raines did not speak till they reached the Skull Creek road below, crossing the

old wooden bridge, and a few scattered lights from the town showed out ahead. French had slowed the pace briefly while he rolled a cigarette.

"Just what is the set-up in here, Bowie?"

"Plenty good. You don't need to worry." A match lighted on thumb nail threw its quick flare across French's face and was extinguished. "There's a lease up in the gap; land belongs to a man named Bannion. Not worth much in itself, but Striker's got an idea that reaches a lot farther. He can explain things to you tomorrow."

He urged the bay once more. The lights of the town ahead disappeared and then came back, winking through the timber. They left the creek bottom and climbed a gradual rise and here the road led into one end of a short, sloping street. A few lighted doorways and windows passed; an occasional horse stood at the street hitch racks. At a corner French stopped and reined his horse around.

"Up yonder's the hotel," he said. "Livery stable across from it, a little farther on. Settle down and make yourself comfortable. But one thing, Jeff, just keep what's happened tonight to yourself! Remember that."

Raines said, "I never did a lot of talking out of turn, Bowie. But don't give me orders."

French held his horse for the space of several seconds and then swung the animal away without replying. Raines jogged up the side street past the hotel and turned into the lantern-lit mouth of a stable. He took his saddlebags from under the blanket roll and gave his animal to the hostler. As he crossed over to the hotel, French's bay and another ridden horse went past the lights of a store on the corner and headed out of town along the Skull Creek road.

II

TEN years ago Lem Bannion brought his first herd of cattle into Skull Creek. It had been late fall and Bannion found the yellowed grass dried, thick and matted deep along the lower timber-sheltered meadows. With two hired

riders he promptly squatted on a strip of land eight or ten miles downcreek from the gap. There were a few stray cattle in the neighborhood, Bar W and J M and the Teacup brands, and Bannion had his riders haze these out. He had filed script on two quarter-sections of land somewhere in the country, to make good his right to run stock there; and he didn't much care where the land actually was so long as he got a winter's feed on this grass.

But with first snowfall the drift of cattle into the creek increased. With the press of the stock came Bar W, J M and Teacup riders, moving down through the gap from the high-country benches and the far slopes of the Bandilleras to the winter range. Shortly after that Lem Bannion's two hired hands met a force of Bar W and J M riders who returned with them to Bannion's wagon camp and the dugout he was building. Old Ed Warner was riding with his crew that day, and he wanted to know by what right Bannion was hazing stock off this part of Skull Creek. Bannion told him about the two quarter-sections on which he had filed script. Warner heard him through in a grim silence.

"According to its description, that land you own lies yonder. Up in the gap," Warner said, when Bannion finished. "It ain't much good as range, and me and my neighbors have been wintering our cattle along this creek for a long while. Most of us own land here. Share with us, mister, but don't ever let me catch you hazing off our stock again."

More and still more cattle came down into Skull Creek from the high benches. The snow fell early and deep that year, followed by weeks of unbroken, bitter cold. Cattle, yarded up under the pines, were unable to break through the frozen drifts or reach the grass below and so many starved. It was a cruel, hard winter. John McKavett, of the J M, came out of it with less than eight hundred head and would have gone broke except for his store in town. Ed Warner drove less than half his range count back to the upper benches next spring, and it was like that all over the country, better of Skull Creek than elsewhere. Such years could not be predicted; the cattlemen gathered together what they had and

started anew. Most of them did, anyway.

But Lem Bannion, the newcomer, could never see things that way. He claimed the other owners had deliberately crowded their cattle against him, trying to ruin him, although in proportion he had lost no more heavily than the average. Bannion, who had at first wanted only a winter's feed, now sold holdings elsewhere and before fall brought in more stock. He was a stubborn, vindictive man, quick to see and take advantage of an opportunity. He saw one here. He built a cabin on the script-filed land he owned in the gap, and, thereafter, wintered his cattle on Skull Creek and ranged the high benchland with the other outfits each summer. Presently he bought a second parcel of land in the gap, and the two riders who worked for him both located homestead claims which in the course of time Bannion purchased.

Five or six years had passed when Warner stopped him on the street in town one day, and bluntly said, "I don't know why you're gatherin' up so much land in the gap, Bannion, and I can think of only one good reason. You've shared the Skull Creek range and the upper country with the rest of us, built up your outfit. Bannion, don't go too far in the gap!"

"Once you told me land in the gap was not worth much, I remember," Bannion sneered. "Changed your mind about that, Warner?"

"Bannion, don't ever try to close the gap! That's all."

Bannion had six or seven riders working for him by that time, including John McKavett's younger half-brother, Anse, who had recently come into the country. Land script was hard to find these days, but Anse McKavett and three of the others had located homestead claims in the gap. It was no new method of acquiring land; many a cattleman had obtained strategic waterholes or meadow land by hiring riders who were willing to use their homestead rights in this way and pass over title, once the claims had been patented. After his meeting with Ed Warner on the street that day Bannion never rode the range or came into town without one or more of his men with him.

About a year later he moved into town for good and set himself up with an office on the street from which he transacted his business. He was playing politics some, making frequent trips out to the countyseat where a newly-elected sheriff was his friend. For several seasons past there had been evidence of a certain amount of rustling on the range.

Later that summer Warner and Joe Liscomb, who was foreman at J M, came on the plain trail of a band of cattle that had been driven across the Bandilleras, and before they were through with their tracking knew that Anse McKavett and another one of Bannion's riders had had a hand in the job. They still lacked proof that would stand up in court, and since Anse was John McKavett's half-brother no word was said of the matter then. Long and steady riding in the high country stopped such scattered losses for a time, but on Skull Creek that winter there was sign of more thievery. It was Ed Warner's opinion that Bannion was doing the contact work and arranging for the stealing from which he took the large cut. Things grew worse the following year.

From his original two quarter-sections of land in the gap Bannion had reached out to the west and east, and so held a close-blocked strip of land between the towering Capwall rocks. Warner had been the first to understand the threat of Bannion's move in the gap. But now from his office in town, always with an armed rider or two at his side, Bannion made it known that the outfits ranging the upper benches would have to lease from him if they wanted to run stock over his holdings into Skull Creek. And about the same time word of this reached Warner in the high country Anse McKavett and two other riders who had homesteaded land and ridden for Bannion were finally caught with stolen stock.

The three escaped beyond gun range. But only the fast horse he rode and a cunning knowledge of the rocky passes through the Bandilleras got Anse out of the country.

Exactly what happened after that no one left in the Capwall country could say. Warner disappeared over the Bandilleras and was gone for nearly a week.

Bannion was able to disclaim any part in the stealing and thus cleared himself, and what took him onto the upper benches without the armed man or two always at his side no one knew. But just above the gap, one early morning, Bannion met Ed Warner for the last time. What information Warner had been able to pick up over beyond the Bandilleras in that week was never learned; it must have been something definite. There the two fought it out.

Matt Tulford, riding through the gap that evening, stumbled on the body of his boss. The gun still in Warner's hand showed that he had fired two shots. Bannion's horse had carried him off into the timber, and it was another dawn before they found him. Bannion's hip was broken with lead embedded in the bone and, although he lived, Bannion never again sat a saddle. He left the Capwall long weeks later, crippled and embittered, swearing he would have his vengeance on this country before he died.

Riders hired to bring Bannion's stock down from the high country drove the herd on out along Skull Creek where it was sold. But there was still the matter of the land Bannion owned in the gap, blocking the movement of stock between the benches and the winter range if he could make good his threat. Without old Ed Warner behind them, the outfits took the easy way and leased the ground for far more than it was worth as range from an attorney Bannion sent in to represent him that early winter.

Two years had passed since then and it seemed that the thing would go on like this, till Bill Striker appeared and a quiet movement of other strangers drifting into the country became evident. One of these outsiders, Bowie French, was deputized from the countyseat where Bannion had his friends. Striker rented Bannion's old office room on the street which still bore a faded sign, "Bannion Land & Cattle Company," over the door. But what Striker's business was or his purpose had not been publicly announced.

FROM his room in the hotel Jeff Raines could look down into the morning-bright street and see McKavett's General Store on the corner and one

side of Bannion's old office next door, where several mud-spattered horses stood. The sun had just climbed above the rim of the hills and in the early chill the horses, recently ridden, steamed a little. Raines considered the events of last night while he took razor and strop from his saddlebags and shaved in a cracked mirror over a battered wash stand, not liking the face that looked back at him from the mirror much.

"You'd better drift," he told himself. "Get out of it while you can."

Across street the creak of a forge carried up from a blacksmith's shed beside the livery stable, and he could see the smithy, a huge, slow-moving man, pumping up his fire. Farther off, wheels clattered over frosty ground and Raines saw the two wagons he had passed on the road yesterday turn into an alley behind the livery stable, where the drivers climbed down stiffly and began to unhitch their teams. From the lower corner French appeared, walking up to the livery stable, and a moment later Raines saw him in talk with the two drivers. He watched till French moved away again. All these things formed a part of the pattern.

A grim pattern.

Three riders had turned the corner now and were coming up past the hotel. The slant of sunlight caught in a girl's hair, making it glow like dull copper under the brim of the wide hat she wore, and as she went by Raines had one quick glance at her face. It raised a strong, immediate interest in him. The three stopped in the mouth of the livery stable, and the younger of the two men with her took charge of the horses. She came back across the street with the other, a gnarled, gray rider who walked with stubby, high-heeled steps, loosening the sheepskin collar of his windbreaker with one cold hand. The morning frost had whipped up spots of color in the girl's cheeks.

The blacksmith looked up from his forge, and called cheerily, "Mornin', ma'am. Mornin', Tulford. How's everything on the upper range?"

The girl turned her head, gave him a quick smile; and the old rider answered, "Good as could be expected this time of year, Dan. But the dry feed's mighty

scant along Skull Creek. That's part of the trouble."

"First thing you know snow will catch you on the benches." The blacksmith grinned.

"Yep, that's a chance we got to take." The oldster, Tulford, stopped and swung around in the street, remembering another thing. "Bick," he called to the other rider, "bring that sorrel down to Dan. Off hindshoe missin', it near skipped my mind," he added to the blacksmith, and followed the girl who had entered the hotel.

Raines packed his saddlebags, hanging them over the foot of the bed. But on his way to the room's door he stopped and took his mackinaw from a peg in the wall where he had hung it last night. He dipped one hand into pocket and brought out the buckskin glove that had come from the floor of the cabin where a man lay dead last night. He studied the glove for a moment, moving back into the room, and thrust it down deep in the saddle-bags. From here he saw the rider Bick leave the trim-legged sorrel the girl had ridden with the blacksmith, and start across to the hotel.

There were four or five men in the lobby below when Raines came down the narrow stairway from his room above. Near the clerk's desk stood the slim, lithe-formed figure of Clegg. Clegg still wore his two guns. For the space of seconds his hard, young-old eyes watched Raines with that same speculative, appraising look that had been in their depths at the cabin when French had called him in, and Raines could have told almost exactly what was in his mind. But Clegg gave no other sign of recognition now, turning back to a paunchy, red-faced man with whom he had been talking as Raines crossed toward the dining room.

THE rider Bick had come in from the street ahead and was pulling out a chair at the table where the girl and Tulford and some townsman were already seated. Raines sat down at a farther table and gave his order to a waitress. He had been conscious of the girl's gaze fixed upon him as he entered the dining room and knew that she was still watching him from the other table. But when

he turned his head that way her eyes were swiftly averted.

Her hair looked darker in this light, a tawny, reddish brown. She wore a buckskin jacket with a bright neckerchief about her throat and high-heeled boots and Levis like a man, without detracting from her femininity. He remembered the easy way she had sat the sorrel coming up the street, and for a moment studied her appreciatively.

The townsman at the table was saying, "But what would Anse McKavett be doing back in this country, if it was his body they found up there? That old rustling charge still stands against him; Anse wouldn't be fool enough to think it had been forgotten. He was crafty-smart as a coyote. All the difference in the world between him and John McKavett."

"There's Joe Liscomb now," the rider Bick put in. He gestured with an arm to a man passing the dining room doorway. "Liscomb was in town with John last night; he'll know if anybody does."

A lank, sandy-complexioned man came in and crossed the room, stopping by their table. "Yes, it was Anse all right. But John McKavett don't know any more about it than the rest of us," Liscomb answered the questions put to him. "About daylight this deputy, Bowie French, and three-four riders hauled up outside John's living quarters behind the store with Anse's body swung across a saddle and carried him in. Anse had been found shot to death up in that old homestead cabin in the gap. It was the first John McKavett had seen or heard anything of him since Anse left the country two years ago. That's all he knows."

Liscomb shook his head. The man looked dog-tired, ridden down from too many hours, too many long days in the saddle. "But another thing is certain. We're up against the same old trouble in the gap, if we lose the Bannion lease today," he said. "And I think we've already lost it, before bids have been opened. There's this man Bill Striker against us, and an outsider deputy appointed from the countyseat six weeks back. It all stacks up that way. Bannion's attorney got in town this mornin', and if Striker takes over he's going to close the gap the

same way Bannion once would have done, except for Ed Warner."

The girl at the table shook her head slightly and looked away, and Liscomb said, "Sorry to stir up the past, Connie. But it's just that way." He continued in the same dogged voice: "Yesterday I was over in the head of Salt Fork, trailin' a few head of strays, and back in the brush I come on the sign of fresh slash. Somebody has been cuttin' posts in there, leavin' 'em hid away out of sight. That's all been done within the past few weeks. Striker don't own no cattle."

Several riders came in from the street just then, filling the nearby lobby with the sounds of their boots and voices, and Raines missed the rest of it. But he had heard enough, he thought; he knew the way Bill Striker worked. The girl rose from her place at the table soon after that, and he watched her straight, slender figure disappear through the lobby doorway. Liscomb sat down in her place at the table. Two or three minutes later Raines finished his breakfast and left the dining room.

He stopped and paid his bill at the hotel desk. Neither Clegg nor the paunchy, red-faced man were in the lobby now. Raines made his way through the group of newcomers and climbed the stairway to his room. He had shoved the door open and stepped inside, half-closing the door behind him, before he saw the girl standing there across the room from him. She lifted one startled hand toward her throat and began backing away, not saying anything.

The few personal belongings Raines carried in his saddlebags had been dumped out of the bags onto the bed. The buckskin glove was not among them. He noticed that as he closed the door behind him.

"Find what you were looking for?" he asked.

She said, "I wasn't—I mean I wasn't trying to steal anything that belonged to you." He liked the sound of her voice, even now. She stood backed against the wall, shaking her head. "You've got to understand that. But I wanted—"

"The glove?" he said.

"Yes, if you have it."

"I did have it," he said. He came on

across the room, looking down at the stuff dumped on the bed, and upended the saddlebags. He turned to her again. "Sure you haven't already got it?"

"No. I found things just like this when I came in." Her voice was scared again. "It took a while to find your room. I've been in here only a minute."

"I heard them call you Connie at the table. Connie Tulford, is it?"

"Connie Warner," she told him. "Matt Tulford works for Bar W."

He said, "I see. The glove's pretty important, isn't it?"

"Yes. It could prove that I was at the cabin last night before you rode in. I saw you standing in the light there, and recognized you downstairs this morning. I knew where I must have left the glove." He saw the doubt that crept into her eyes suddenly. "You—you're not one of Bill Striker's men?"

"I'm my own man," he said. "But I think I know what's happened to the glove. I should have taken better care of it."

III

HE stuffed the articles on the bed into the saddlebags again after she had gone out and picked up his mackinaw. He tramped back down the stairs, carrying the bags thrown over one shoulder. At the livery stable he helped the hostler saddle his horse, strapping the blanket roll he had left here behind cante, ready to drift again, but did not lead the animal from its stall.

"I'll be back presently," he told the hostler.

He walked on through the stable to the open alley door and came out there beside the two wagons. Raines raised an end of the tarpaulin on one of the loads and looked at the hundred-pound rolls of new barbed wire it covered. This was what he had known he would find. He walked along the alley to its end in the other street, moving without hurry. A small crowd had collected now in front of the old Bannion office with the faded sign over its door. There were a number of horses scattered at racks along the street.

Raines stopped at the mouth of the

alley, watching the movement. From this point he saw Matt Tulford, walking with his stiff, high-heeled steps, round the corner from the hotel with Connie Warner and Liscomb, followed by several riders. A large, angular man with a stubby, black beard appeared in the door of the McKavett General Store and Connie crossed the street, climbing the store steps to his side. That would be John McKavett, Raines decided. Liscomb and Matt Tulford came on along the near side of the street and joined a loose-spaced group of townsmen and riders standing across from the Bannion office. Clegg with his two guns at hips idled beside a hitch rail in front of the office now with an elaborate carelessness, missing none of this gathering and shifting of men along the street, Raines knew.

He watched Bowie French step from the door of a saloon across the alley and come toward him. "I figured if you was goin' you'd have pulled out early," French said. "And maybe that would have been best after all. Striker's waitin' over yonder. He wants to talk with you."

Raines said, "All right."

"You walk across to the farther alley-way there," French continued. "There's a side door we can use which will be less conspicuous. I'll follow you in a minute."

Raines nodded and walked across into the farther alley. He identified a second rider who had ridden with French last night standing at this end of the Bannion office. Raines halted with the street behind him now and waited for French. French didn't speak as he came up and led the way through a clutter of old freight and packing crates behind a couple of buildings, reaching the back of the Bannion office. He turned into the narrow space here and threw open a side door.

The room Raines entered had a desk and several chairs set forward near the windows that opened on the street. The rear of the place held an accumulation of gear, a couple of pack outfits and boxes and three or four cots which Striker's crew evidently used. Bill Striker himself was standing up beside one of the front windows, talking to a rider who leaned against the casement of the half-opened door on the street, and the

paunchy, red-faced man Raines had seen in the hotel lobby with Clegg earlier sat behind the battered desk. The drivers of the two loads that had been left back of the livery stable occupied chairs tilted against one wall, their heavy coats thrown open.

Striker wheeled around as French and Raines came in. He said to the rider, "Well, see to it! When this starts we'll be moving fast," and centered his attention on Raines. He was a muscular, big-shouldered man, as tall as Raines and heavier in the body. His face was smooth with the flesh rolled firmly over high cheekbones and the thrust of his jaw. He wore a gray shapeless hat cuffed back on a head of coarse, dark hair, and his eyes studied Raines with a kind of mocking hardness in their depths.

"Bowie was tellin' me he sort of rode into you unexpected last night, Raines," he said. "I'm hopin' that's the fact of things. If it was otherwise we're not going to get along very well together, like that time in the Santiago. Only here I'm running the show. Bowie tells me you need a job."

Raines stopped by the corner of the desk. "That was last night," he said. "Since then I've heard some talk and looked around some more. I don't reckon I want any part of it, Striker. I don't need a job that bad."

The rider Striker had been talking to in the doorway settled around, watching Raines. Bowie French stopped behind. Striker ran his tongue along the edge of his lips and spat into a cuspidor beside the desk. He drew a plug of tobacco from pocket and bit off a chip deliberately, rolling it into the side of his mouth.

"Maybe you don't yet understand quite what I mean, Raines. I'd hate to see you hire out to one of the bench outfits or even start ridin' out of the country now," Striker said. "One way or another you got yourself into this thing pretty deep last night, and you're either workin' for me or against me. That's the way I'd have to figure things. But it's a nice set-up if you want to play along on the right side. There's a lease in here, the Bannion lease. It takes in a strip of land across gap between the Capwall rocks. You had a look at the country last night.

Three-four miles of wire stretched across that land can plug the gap. There's four thousand head of cattle on the open benches above right now."

Raines said, "The general idea's plain enough."

"Uh-huh. That stock has got to have winter range along Skull Creek. There's the steep bluffs to the east, fence and range that belongs to other men out beyond; stock can't be moved around that way. To the west you strike roughs and slick rock, rising into one end of the Bandilleras. Through the gap is the only way four thousand head of cattle can be drove back and forth between the benches and Skull Creek. There was some trouble two years back; Bannion quit the country at that time. Since then the bench outfits have been leasing the ground from him."

"And now you've got the Bannion lease?"

Striker grinned. He gestured toward the paunchy man sitting behind the desk. "This-here is Sam Cantwell. Bannion's attorney. Sure, I've got the lease. I've been in here a couple months, plantin' a few men around where they'll do the most good when trouble breaks. Layin' the groundwork," Striker said. "French has been appointed deputy from the county-seat where Bannion still has some influence. Maybe you've noticed there's something of a crowd gatherin' outside in the street this mornin'. Last year's lease expires today. The crowd outside is waitin' for Sam Cantwell to inform it how the new bids have gone. Them with cattle on the benches ain't goin' to like it."

Raines said nothing. Striker teetered back and forth on his bootheels for a moment.

"I reckon, Sam, you might just as well get it over with," he told Cantwell. "From now on the play's in the open."

THE man behind the desk gathered up a paper and took a hammer and tacks from one of the desk drawers. He stepped out past the rider in the doorway, and Raines heard him tacking up some sort of a notice on the street-front of the building. Boots shifted and moved along the street out there. Through the door Raines had a momentary glimpse of Tulford and the rider Bick quartering across

with Liscomb. A mumble of conversation grew and spread among the riders and cowmen out there and became a low-voiced mutter along the street. Striker grinned.

"Just like that, Jeff. I used to know Bannion up in Montana; he gets an inside cut from the deal. Come next spring, there'll be a new cow outfit in this country ownin' the big end of everything. Three-four miles of wire across the gap is goin' to accomplish that. But all the same I'm curious about what happened last night." Striker swung around abruptly, facing Raines again. "I mean before French come on you in that cabin where a man was lyin' dead," he said. "Did you know Anse McKavett?"

Raines said, "No."

"It's damn' peculiar, Raines. Down crick some two-three hundred yards, we come on a spot where a man had made his camp, trackin' around a little, and then that man had put out his fire and left. From the looks of it, I'd say maybe you had been waitin' around to meet Anse McKavett. Somethin' happened there. I want to know what it was." Striker reached into pocket and pulled out a buckskin glove. He drew it limply through his hands a time or two, watching Raines. "I'm wonderin' where you picked up this?"

"I've been waiting, Striker, for you to bring that out," Raines said. His voice became tonelessly soft in his throat. "Never send a man to paw through my stuff again. I don't like it! I'll take the glove, Striker."

Striker moved his boots a little on the floor, placing them firmly under him. He leaned his weight forward and turned very stiff. "Jeff, I can use a man like you here," he said. "You fought a loser's end in the Santiago, but you're a fighting man. Last night you got yourself into this, and it ain't the kind of a deal where I am takin' any chances. I've been explainin' that to you. Either you're with me or against me. It's known Anse McKavett intended to meet somebody there in the gap last night. I've givin' you your chance to talk."

Raines said, "I'll take the glove, Striker. Then I'll be riding on."

Striker's eyes shifted toward French,

and some silent understanding passed between the two. From the street outside an angry voice lifted: "Wait for what? There's only one way cattle can be moved between the benches and Skull Creek." Striker turned. He threw the glove down on the desk top and wheeled around against the street-front window where he had been standing when Raines came in, grinning wolfishly. Raines picked up the glove, and saw Bowie French's glance slide away from him. But if it had been a bluff Raines knew his knowledge of these two men was all wrong.

He stopped in the street doorway. "Don't anybody follow me too close," he said, "when I leave town."

Then he turned to go.

Sam Cantwell, the attorney, pushed in past him. Raines turned and crossed the small open porch in front of the Bannion office, moving into the crowd that had packed up here. Over heads he had a glance at Connie Warner, standing on the raised platform of the McKavett store where he had seen her last. The girl was staring fixedly this way. Raines had moved along the plank board walk five or six paces, hardly more, when a rider backed into him suddenly. Voices ceased and an utter silence spread along the street both ways.

The crowd was shifting away from Clegg who stood on the edge of the walk with his two arms crooked at the elbows and held out a little at his sides, bringing his slim hands over the polished butts of the guns he wore. Clegg's young-old eyes glistened; there was something strainingly eager in him. Standing out in the road dust in front of Clegg was the rider Bick, who held his ground and faced Clegg steadily. But all the color had drained away from under the weatherburn on Bick's features, leaving his skin a dirty gray with the mouth a tight-clamped line like a welt across his face.

On the other side Tulford, suddenly, was pushing a way through. "Forget it, Bick," Tulford urged. "Come on, we're leavin' town right away. This ain't no time for a quarrel."

"The hell it ain't!" Clegg's thin-edged voice cut in. "He's already got himself into a quarrel. Now he can either go after his shootin' iron or crawl."

RAINES moved very swiftly. Last night in the cabin he had known Clegg for what he was when he first saw the slim, yellow-haired gunman and caught that lingering look of appraisal in his eyes. In trouble there were always men like this, young or old, ready to kill for personal glory to feed a rat-like vanity. Raines reached him, bringing the point of his shoulder down and swinging it against Clegg solidly so that the impact of it threw Clegg half-around and staggered him backward at once. Raines gave him no time to recover, following and shoving with his body till he backed Clegg off the edge of the walk. It took Clegg entirely by surprise.

His face turned livid. His two slim hands had dropped and taken hold of the butts of his guns, but like that something held him. He quivered like a man lashed with a whip, eyes venomous in his pale, almost womanish face, but indecision had its hold upon him and still he did not draw.

"Go ahead!" Raines said. "It's been troublin' you since you first seen me, you been wonderin' how fast I am. Well, now's your chance to learn. Or don't you draw against a man that wears his gun swung forward the same way you do?"

Clegg's mouth worked, white and bitter, but no words came. His hands parted from the gun butts at his hips and he began stroking the holster leather with that gesture Raines had seen before. Clegg started backing off into the road dust, quartering into the street. The shifting crowd kept moving away from him. Tulford had pulled Bick's old hogleg from holster by this time, shoving it into his own waistband, and Liscomb had a grip on the puncher and was moving him off the other way. In the middle of the street Clegg stopped, and Raines thought for that instant that it was coming. Suddenly Clegg turned his back instead, walking away with rapid steps toward the saloon beyond the alley.

Riders and townsmen started talking everywhere at once, and Raines wanted no part of this. He pushed a way through, reached the opposite side of the street and was rounding the corner toward the hotel when he met Tulford who had

stopped and waited there. Raines had forgotten the glove and the girl during this; turning, he saw her still standing on the raised porch of the McKavett store, looking across toward him.

He said to Tulford, "Here's something Miss Warner lost in the hotel this morning. I'll be obliged if you will hand it to her."

Tulford took the glove. "Mister," he said, "I don't know why you did it. But Bick's been trailin' along with me since he was a youngster; good, honest boy, I think a heap of him. If you need a job, if there's any way for me to pay you back, you'll find me at Bar W."

"No, I'm moving out," Raines said. "It's not my fight. But I reckon you can tell me, what's the best way through the high range yonder?"

"There's only one way," Tulford told him. "Back through the gap and up across the benches. Above, you'll see the notch of a saddle pass, due ahead as you go. Snow ain't yet blocked the pass. But, mister, if you change your mind—"

Raines said, "Thanks," and walked on to the stable where he took out his waiting horse and climbed into the saddle.

IV

HE crossed Skull Creek behind the town with the roan feeling good under him after a night's rest and feed, and stayed with the timber here till he could climb up into the gap. Two or three miles stood between him and that deserted cabin where a man had been found dead last night when Raines rode up against the nearer of the tall, broken Capwall rocks. From this high point he watched two parties of riders take the much-used trail through the gap, raising thin stringers of dust above the timber. These would be Bar W and J M's crew, returning to the benches, and Raines thought of the girl who would be riding beside Tulford. What, he wondered, had taken her to that cabin to meet Anse McKavett last night?

For the best part of an hour, while the morning sun climbed up toward the meridian, he stayed in shelter of the towering mass of rock, watching his back trail. Timber thinned into scrub when he rode

on and Raines scrutinized the openings warily, still not entirely convinced that he hadn't been followed. Gradually the scrub gave way to the open sweep of the benchland which rose in a wide, encircled plain toward the rocky slant of the Bandilleras, ten miles away, and Raines struck off across it, knowing that only steady riding for the rest of this day was going to carry him through the slot-like pass in the range ahead and down into other grass and timber shelter for the night. At length the bee-line course of his travel brought him into that broad, hoof-pocked trail from the gap; then a mile or two beyond, off on his right, ranch buildings and a clump of bare cottonwoods showed up in a swale of the land. Here an old sign marked with a Bar W stood at a fork in the trail.

Cattle were being moved under a distant, low head of dust off on his left, too far away for Raines to distinguish anything more than that. Again the trail split, still showing much sign of travel to the west, but the fork Raines followed soon narrowed into a dim-trodden path toward the pass. The rise of the land became more abrupt, steeper than it had looked at a distance, and the rocky peaks grew high and rugged before him. The grassland edged into broken ground, cut by sharp-sided coulees and boulder-strewn washes that came down from the mountain walls. There was a cold wind blowing from off the snow of the high peaks and Raines buttoned his mackinaw against it. He climbed up between narrow side ridges, turning in the saddle here for a last look at the dun-brown stretch of the benchland which lay behind him.

He was wholly unprepared for the waspish whine of a bullet and the sudden crash of that shot, coming down from the rocks above. In the sharp racket of echoes he could not even have told from which of the side walls it had been fired, but in the small space of that time he had already swung the roan and dug the spurs in deep, knowing his only chance was to run. Some second gun roared above him then, the first whanged out another shot and he lost count while the roan went across a loose pile of rocks, digging its nose down to earth. The animal turned completely over with the momentum of the run, the saddle a catapult under Raines. With that blast

of shots around him, the ground rocked up and he hit it, sprawled.

It knocked the wind and the sense out of him and a black wall closed before his eyes. But that couldn't have lasted very long. There was still a lingering mutter of echoes, volleyed back and forth between walls, and the roan, shot through the chest, was kicking its death struggle when he became aware of things again. He lay there flat, moving no muscle, while the flesh along his back crawled. He had been thrown out six or eight yards from the loose rick of rocks where the animal had tumbled. His face was in the dirt with the dust-spatter of a bullet across one cheek, and all he could see without moving his head was the distance to the partial cover of those rocks if he could make it.

The two men or more above him had rifles against the short range of his Colt's, and if he reached those rocks and had a chance to put up a fight it was only early afternoon which meant it wouldn't be much of a battle. All the time while he tensed his muscles and got ready to go he expected another shot which would end things in that instant. But the shot didn't come and in that lengthening silence he began to surmise that they had finished shooting at him in that interval while he lay there senseless. From somewhere above, a voice called audibly, "Come on across. That's it, I reckon!"

A fraction of an inch at a time Raines moved his head. From the corner of one eye, finally, he could make out the figure of a man standing among the boulders and ledge-rock of the slope above. He could see the rifle held crisscross to the man's body, and another figure working over the rough ridgeside toward him. The two men met and stood together, looking down at him from this distance, and presently Raines saw a puff of white cigarette smoke. He lay dead-still.

One of the men started scrambling down the slope then. From somewhere up the pass he came back leading a couple of horses. The second rider left his stand and worked his way down toward the horses. Little by little, Raines moved his right hand under him and got his Colt's free from holster. He turned his head a little more, unable to see anything of the pair now, but he still wasn't sure enough

about it to make an open move. It took all the will power in him to keep from breaking for those rocks. But the two still had their rifles and under crossfire what cover he could find among the rocks would not amount to much. He shifted his position slightly, very slowly, and brought the Colt's up under his chest.

He lay sprawled out like that, waiting, when the two came in sight again. Bowie French was walking, leading his horse by the reins, but Clegg had climbed into saddle. French dropped the reins and clambered over the rocks where Raines' mount lay, holding a long-barreled Winchester loosely in one hand. Clegg had thrust his rifle back into saddleboot. He stopped and held his horse beside the rocks, watching.

"Plumb dead, ain't he?" Clegg asked. He cursed the dead man.

But as Bowie French stepped nearer either some small motion or the round, steady muzzle of the Colt's that protruded from under Raines' chest told him that the dead man was dangerously alive. French dug his heels into the ground and brought up his rifle, all with one violent movement. The shot Raines fired smashed into the stock of French's Winchester, splintering the wood and partially knocking the weapon from his grip. French's big hands opened. By that time Raines was up on his knees, thumbing a second shot into barrel. Only four or five yards separated them.

Clegg, beyond the rocks with his rifle already thrust into boot, whirled his horse while he tore after his hip gun. Raines missed that second shot, fired at Clegg. Clegg was running off, lengthening the range every jump, when he started shooting back. Bowie French had both hands in the air now and was backing off as Raines came at him. One of his arms was bleeding. There was a mad fury on Raines' face that French fully understood, and he kept reaching higher all the time till his heels collided with the rocks behind.

Raines said, "So you couldn't let me ride out of the country like I came? No, you had to have somebody for a goat, somebody to charge with that killing last night and, dead, I'd fit the bill. French, if you want to live another ten seconds you better start yelling to that other rat-hearted gun-slinger!"

"Clegg! Clegg," French bellowed, "put down your gun! Or else—"

"There ain't no *or else* about it. Turn half around." Raines yanked French's six-gun from holster and threw it off among the rocks, holding the deputy between him and Clegg. Clegg had halted and dismounted at a distance, watching for his chance with the rifle. "Tell him to lay that gun down on the ground and start ridin'. I mean right now, French!"

French relayed this order. Raines stood behind him till Clegg had dropped the rifle and started circling beyond six-gun range, to get out of the pass. When Raines was sure he could reach the rifle first he climbed over the rocks and swung into French's saddle.

"Now," Raines said, "you can tell Bill Striker how it happened. This mornin' he seemed almighty sure that I was either with him or against him. You can tell him now that it's against him, and I'm staying in the country. You've made up my mind for me."

V

RAINES reached the Bar W yards sometime well after dark with a rifle he hadn't had that morning and French's horse which no way compared to the roan under him. He had climbed above and waited in the pass till late dusk, not certain what reinforcements French might have in the neighborhood, and then descended and stripped his own saddle and gear from the roan before starting back. A couple of squares of yellow window light showed out from the long, low-roofed log house ahead. A dog began to bay and, farther off, the door of a bunk shack opened and closed suddenly.

Raines passed big, solid pole corrals, hearing the stir of a number of horses penned within. A stack of wild meadow hay and the wedge-shaped roof of a barn loomed up on this side. He cut on across the yards under the bare-limbed cottonwoods and in the dark came against a hitch rail beside the house. He halted here. The barking of the dog had ceased at some low-voiced command, and now the voice said, "Speak up, rider!"

Raines named himself, and heard Tulford say to another man, "It's all right,

Marley. You take care of his horse." Raines swung down.

In the dark he could form no impression of the hand who took his horse. He followed Tulford to the house and entered a big warm kitchen. Tulford was asking no questions and Raines volunteered no answers. The Bar W crew had evidently eaten here a while ago, and Connie Warner was finishing the dishes stacked in a big pan on the stove. Her quick, expressionful eyes searched Raines' face as he came into the lamplight, and he could not determine whether it was only surprise or if there was also fright in that glance. She looked subtly different than he remembered her from that morning in town, smaller somehow and very slim with a big kitchen apron wrapped about her waist. Whatever it had been in her eyes, it did not show in her voice.

She said, "I'll get you something to eat right away. Sit down here."

He washed in a basin of hot water that Tulford set on a bench beside the door and then sat down at the end of the long table in the room. Raines had seen a lot of outfits, but none that offered a rider the fresh milk, over-warmed bread and honey and a loin of cold roast venison such as she put down before him. He ate with the hunger and solid satisfaction of a man who had been out all day with no food under his belt since morning. Tulford sat across from him, smoking an old briar that wheezed each time he drew on it. Once they heard a rider clatter in, the dog bayed briefly and then was hushed. The girl stopped still beside the stove, listening.

"That will be Bick," Tulford told her. "I sent him over to J M after supper."

But after a moment Tulford rose and started out. Raines had finished his meal and turned to follow. Just before he reached the door, the girl's hand touched his sleeve and stopped him.

"Thank you, about the glove today," she said, low-voiced. "Did he—did Striker have it?"

Raines answered, "Yes. But he knows no more than that," and went on out into the cold chill of the night. He had thought of this before. That morning Striker hadn't known where Raines had got the glove, but the hunch that had been in his mind then was sooner or later going to

ripen into plain suspicion. Raines himself was the one substantiating witness who had seen McKavett climb the gap on a running horse and knew that no shot had later been fired in the cabin. And somehow when he considered that he knew that even if he had crossed the pass today, tomorrow he would have been coming back.

Tulford stood with Bick close against the near wall of the house before him, and Bick was saying, "Two loads of wire. Liscomb left a man in town to watch. About noon both wagons hauled out and turned up into the gap. Striker had his crew out there. They doubled teams on the loads and pulled the wagons up to the cabin above, cuttin' out occasional timber where necessary—" He stopped talking at sight of Raines.

Tulford turned, sucking on the stem of his wheezy pipe. "I'm not askin' what brought you back, Raines," he said. "But is it in your mind to stay a while on the benches now?"

Raines said, "In town this morning you mentioned a job."

"I was hopin' it was that way." Tulford nodded, and swung back to Bick. "Go ahead," he said.

"How close a guard Striker will have around that wire tonight Liscomb or nobody knows," Bick continued. "Countin' the two wagon drivers, there's been eighteen men on the job today. If he ain't checked in the next few days, Striker's going to have that wire strung four strands strong across the gap. But it would take the best part of two weeks to bring in more wire from the outside. Snow and freezin' weather might hold him up all winter then. Liscomb sent me back to you with that question: He wants to know if you're willing to make a try after that wire, Matt?"

Tulford said, "No. It ain't my own outfit I'm runnin'; it belong to Connie. I won't make the first move." He stood there in the night a while, puffing on the pipe that wheezed. "Because of Connie's father. She loved him more than most daughters do, and who fired the first shot between him and Lem Bannion or the certain reason for it is something she never will know. I've seen it tormentin' her for two years now. No, I won't take Bar W to strike the first blow."

"Liscomb's only got three hands," Bick said.

"I know, I know. But I'm thinkin' first of Connie. You take Raines over to the bunkhouse, Bick. Don't say anything about this to the rest of the boys." He added, "I'll see you in the morning, Raines."

Crossing the space of yards toward the bunk shack, Raines asked, "How many in the crew here, Bick?"

"Five men; you make the sixth. I don't know whether to get down on my knees and thank you for what happened in town this morning or to take a swing at your jaw."

Bick grinned sourly.

"Suppose you just forget it. Who's the latest to arrive?"

"Marley. He hired on a month ago. Most of the rest of us have been ridin' with Bar W since Ed Warner's time. Me, I drifted in with old Matt Tulford six years ago. I was eighteen. When a man's rode with an outfit that long—"

Raines said, "I know."

THERE were three riders sitting around a table in the log bunk shack when they entered and a fourth man leaned against the wall nearby, watching the progress of a penny-ante card game on the table. The man by the wall had a long, pointed face that tapered from his beetled brow to a narrow, protruding jaw. Bick introduced Raines around the table, to Chuck and Dave Kehoe and Vic Ewen who was as gray as Tulford, and turned to the standing rider.

"Meet Spike Marley, Raines."

Marley had a way of holding his head slightly lowered, looking up from under the ridge of his brows. He watched Raines steadily for the space of seconds. "The man that made the grandstand play in town this mornin', huh?" he said, and turned away.

There was sudden silence at the table. To cover it, Bick said, "How about your gear, Raines? Have anything you'll need on saddle?"

"Roll and saddlebags," Raines told him.

Marley looked around. "Thoughtless of me, I left your stuff out in the stable. But seems to me I've noticed that horse you was ridin' before somewhere, Raines. Maybe under Bowie French, the deputy."

Raines said, "That's right," without offering any explanation, and listened to the ticking of a battered old alarm clock on a wall shelf. He was certain Bill Striker would have overlooked no opportunity to place a rider on the inside here, and this was the man. Marley had thrown off his coat or riding jumper and wore no gun, but Raines could have selected his weapon from the several about the room with no difficulty. Spike Marley's hung in holster from the belt which was hooked over a nail at the head of one of the end bunks, too good a weapon, too well kept, for the ordinary cowhand's six-shooter. Marley was standing over by the bunk now.

"I'll get your saddlebags," Bick offered. "Plenty of spare bedding here; you won't need the roll."

"Thanks."

The card game continued, voices raised a little too loud suddenly. Bick came back with Raines' saddlebags and pointed out the spare bunk and blankets. Presently Vic Ewen quit the card game, eyeing the battered clock. Five o'clock came early on a dark morning, and Ewen crossed to the round-bellied stove in a corner and began banking the fire. Raines sat down on the edge of the bunk, pulling off his boots. Chuck and Dave Kehoe finished a cheerful argument about the last nickel jackpot while Ewen still fiddled about the stove.

"All right, I'll blow out the lamp on my way to bed," the old rider said.

Marley had strayed around to the card table again. As he turned and came back past Raines' bunk his foot caught one of Raines' boots and sent it skidding across the floor. Raines waited for him to pick up the boot and bring it back; but Marley disregarded it, reaching his own bunk. Both Chuck and Dave Kehoe stopped.

"Marley," Raines said, "a man don't like to go searchin' around for his boots in the morning. Bring it back!"

Marley whirled. His left hand had a hold of the gunbelt and holster hanging from the nail; his right was lifted up across his chest, ready to reach for the weapon. His eyes held steady under his beetled brows. He said, sneeringly, "So now you're givin' orders around this bunkhouse, huh?"

He was tough and Raines knew it, and

this was the way he wanted things, the sooner over with and finished the better all around. Raines had laid aside his belt and gun, and made no move that way. He stooped and reached for his other boot, half-standing on bent legs beside his bunk.

"Bring it back, Marley. Or I'm coming after you!"

Marley yelled, "Come ahead, you—!" His lifted hand drove for his gun immediately. Raines' arm swung fast and let go of the boot and it caught Marley solidly in the ribs, jerking a deep grunt out of him. He reached the gun all the same without pause and threw it around. But Raines was coming low, right behind the boot, and the distance between bunks was very short. He slammed into Marley who had no space to give against the wall; before he could twist the gun muzzle into Raines' body and fire, Raines had his arm. He bent and levered that arm over with a shoulder under Marley's armpit and both hands on his wrist. For an instant Marley stood the savage pain of it, strained against him, and then the gun slipped. Raines heard it strike the floor and let go of the man and slugged.

Marley lacked his bone and solid-muscled weight. He held Marley against the wall and slammed body blows into him, hammering and battering at his ribs and stomach, till he could no longer feel any power in Marley's fists and not much resistance in the man and then he stepped back finally and let him slip. This was the way it had to be; force was the only law a man like Marley recognized, and he had to punish him and make him quit. There wasn't any other way. Marley's head lolled over, but no bruise of the beating he had taken showed on his face. That, too, had been deliberate on Raines' part; he wanted Marley to have to face Bill Striker like that. He kicked the gun across the floor toward Vic Ewen.

"Best keep that in your own hands till tomorrow," Raines said, and went back to his bunk.

It might have been an hour, two hours, later when he heard the thing that he had expected in the black bunkhouse. A man was moving out across the room from Marley's bunk in the corner, taking one slow step after another. Vic Ewen

breathed heavily; then against the lighter square of a window in the back wall Raines could make out Spike Marley's dim figure, stopped beside Ewen. He stirred and heard Marley move on without attempting any search after the gun the old rider had kept. Presently the bunkhouse door opened narrowly and closed behind Marley.

In the next bunk Bick muttered softly and his stockinged feet hit the floor with a padded sound, and Raines knew that Bick had been watching this, too. Raines said, "Best the way it is, Bick. He was Striker's man."

Bick was grim.

"Yeah. Yeah, I know that now. I want to see he don't take more'n one horse from the corral."

Bick pulled into his Levis and boots, careful not to wake the others. Two or three minutes had elapsed when Raines followed him from the bunkhouse door, both with their guns strapped on. Bick had a thorough knowledge of these yards and silently cut across toward the dark shape of the barn, striking the line of the corral poles before he reached it and stopping presently beside a water trough. From here they watched Marley lead out his saddled horse and immediately head off into the night.

Bick said, "Well, that's that, I guess. But reckon I'll stay out here in the yards a while, just on a chance. You might as well go back and get your sleep, Raines. Say!" He turned. "What's that? My God, he's set the barn on fire!"

VI

SOMEWHERE off in the farther night, Spike Marley no doubt watched this. There was little they could do. A match dropped in a stall had flamed up into the dry, half-filled mow above. There was no quantity of water at hand; by the time Bick and Raines had collected pails and filled them from the trough the blaze was roaring in the hay above. They cut horses loose from the stalls below and ran the stock out, joined by Tulford and the rest of the bunkhouse crew now. Flame was already pouring out under eaves of the mow. Dry shakes above were curling up and dropping through. In less than

ten minutes of time the middle of the roof fell in.

A billowing column of fire, choked with sparks, leaped high into the night with the wind carrying it over toward the big outside haystack. Blistered, clothing scorched by falling sparks, the crew gave up a futile fight to save the stack and broke a hole in the opposite wall of the corral to get the stock penned there out. Good horses, hard-muscled and well-fed, were going to be needed under riders more than ever now, and by a match Bar W had lost the means of keeping its saddlestock in shape. The barn, timbers hauled and hewn, shakes split by hand, had been the work of Ed Warner more than twenty years ago. But the barn did not matter so much as the loss of the hay in the mow and stack.

There was nothing more that could be done; most of the gear and saddles had been saved, all the horses run out. Raines caught sight of Connie standing over by the water trough, a bucket still in hand. Her face looked small and white in the ruddy light with a smear of ash across one cheek. He said to Tulford then, "Striker's struck the first blow. Are you waiting any longer?"

Tulford wiped his forehead and eyes, and suddenly he looked old and broken and unsure of himself. "No. No," he said. "You're the kind of a man to take charge of the crew tonight, Raines. But be careful—careful you don't bring one of the boys home dead."

Raines said, "It's not like that, Tulford. Not the time to be careful."

"I know, I know," Tulford muttered. "Go ahead."

Four men with him, Raines met Joe Liscomb and his crew of three coming across from J M with the dying glow of the fire still visible across the benches. Out here on the sweep of the open land the wind was very cold, biting in through the flaps of coats and upturned collars. Liscomb said he had hay enough and the spare saddle stock could be driven over to J M tomorrow and held there. That was, Raines thought, if J M had a haystack of its own tomorrow. This foreman for John McKavett didn't yet understand the way Bill Striker fought; Striker went into a thing to win any way he could. He was

after the benchland and all the winter graze along Skull Creek, knowing he had to break the outfits here to gain his end. Probably the cards had been so carefully stacked on Striker's side that he could not lose; it looked that way to Raines.

At midnight or a little after, when they reached the gap, the top crust of the ground had started to freeze, and in the frosty cold the stamp of a horse's hoof, the crackle of dry brush or a man's stiff footsteps sounded unnaturally loud. Liscomb had a halfbreed boy with him whom he sent down through the timber to reconnoiter the ground. One thing was in their favor: Marley might have passed the wire camp and gone by on his way into town, but if the blaze on the benches had been sighted the wagonmen and work crew here would not be expecting trouble for a time. The boy came back and reported that the two wagons, neither unloaded, had been left in the clearing by the shack, teams unharnessed and tied in the timber. There was a man or two sleeping under the wagons; more, probably, inside the cabin.

Wire was a hard thing to destroy; Raines figured there would be about three tons of it or more on these two wagons. A lot of wire. Short of dumping it over the high bluffs to the east or upending the loads into quicksand holes along Skull Creek, there was no way to dispose of it so the wire could not be readily salvaged later. Still it would make a lot of trouble. Scattering the loads would at least hold Striker up a day or two; and things like that, delay, trouble, could in the end have a telling outcome.

Raines took Bick and Dave Kehoe with him to circle the cabin, while Liscomb and the halfbreed boy stole down on the man or two sleeping under the wagons and the rest of the crew waited the signal. Presently there was a half-muffled shot from the vicinity of the wagons. Raines opened immediate fire on the front of the cabin, and right after that heard Liscomb's rallying yell. There was movement in the cabin, but a minute or more passed before answering shots began to show their bright streaks from shelter of a half-opened door and a side window. Bick was over on the side, leveling his fire at the window from a point where he could also shell the doorway and add the force of his gun to

Kehoe's if a rush came. Both had plenty of ammunition to continue the siege.

Raines headed across toward the wagons then, to help hitch the teams. In a very short time they had the loads moving; the trouble started after that. A wagon skidded, piled against a stump and the team had to be unhitched and hooked on behind to drag the load free. This was hardly beyond the edge of the clearing. Liscomb said that there were holes below the bridge across Skull Creek where both wagons and loads would disappear forever. But it had taken Striker and a number of men all afternoon to haul the loads up into the gap and, while a way had been cut through, it was dark night now. Teams tangled; harness was broken; time and again the wagons hit some obstruction in the timber. Where Striker had doubled teams to pull the grade, now drag logs had to be tied behind on the steep open stretches.

THE sound of desultory fire still came from the cabin, rolling its long echoes off into this clear, frosty night. The wagon in the lead had almost reached the bridge below when the thing Raines had feared all along happened. Hoofs, coming along the Skull Creek road, raised a sudden clatter across the wooden bridge. There was a quick shouting after that, laced with a new racket of guns.

Ewen was driving the last wagon and Chuck led the saddle horses. Liscomb's yell carried up the slope, and the sounds of horses and this firing started off into the side timber. Raines and Ewen cut the last team and drag log loose and let the wagon roll. The weight of the load took it down the slope at a sudden, rushing speed and then the crash came, a splintered rending of wood and frame as the wagon hit some pine trunk and overturned, followed by the noise of loose spools of wire hurtling and rolling on through the underbrush and timber. It was the best that they could do for this night.

Half or three-quarters of an hour later Bar W and J M's crew gathered on the edge of the benchland above. Liscomb had wrenched a leg so badly that he probably wouldn't be riding much for a time. They were shy one mount and two of Liscomb's men rode double, and Dave Kehoe had a gun wound in his shoulder that was pain-

ing him a lot. Raines wanted to know where he could find the cut posts that Liscomb had discovered in Salt Fork.

Liscomb told him. "But that won't help much," he said. "Striker can just about string his wire on standing timber, the way it grows in the gap. A hundred posts that two good choppers could cut in a day would see him through in a pinch."

"Everything helps," Raines said.

Before daylight he and Bick had found the posts. The cut junipers still had a lot of green sap in them; it took an hour or more to kindle a dry wood blaze and drag the more distant hidden piles to it and get the whole mass burning. They parted after that in the thin dawn, not daring to stay longer in this spot. Bick headed back for Bar W and Raines set off alone with Clegg's rifle under his knee and a box of shells for it in pocket, planning the next moves of the hit-and-run game that it was left for him to play.

Little or no help could be expected from the Teacup iron which grazed the high and low range with the others. Teacup, owned by outside interests, employed only two men who shifted their camp between the benches and Skull Creek, depending on the season, and always had their hands full with the job. Most of Teacup's cattle had already been drifted down into Skull Creek, despite the short feed there. Bar W and J M, holding on the benches to save the lower grass, now had the work of gathering stock from the back ridges and roughs along the Bandilleras and trying to beat the progress of Striker's fence across the gap which, if they could do it, still settled nothing and would only delay the issue till another spring.

That was Striker's set-up, backed by Bannion on the outside and the deputy's badge Bowie French wore. Bannion had spent the best part of ten years accumulating a strip of land across the gap for this single purpose, and Raines could see no hole in the plan. Bar W's fight looked just as hopeless to him now as yesterday morning when Striker had explained the scheme. His thoughts were dark as the shadows clinging under the massive Capwall rocks, as he climbed up into the shelter of the nearer of those towering heads of broken granite. Fence of course could always be cut, a band of cattle driven through here,

another there; but with the ends of his fence anchored against these rocks four short miles of barbed wire line between was not much for a gun crew to patrol. In the end Striker could make it too costly; he would have his way.

From under the rocks Raines spotted three or four men working across a small clearing a short half-mile below. This was just after sunup. He kept his horse beside him, but shifted around till he had the rest of a boulder for the rifle. His first shot was wide, high and pulled a little to the right, he judged. The men broke off the other way at a run and reached cover of the timber. Raines fiddled with the rifle sights. He fired six or eight shots, staying here for half an hour, till a line of dust above the farther timber showed riders headed his way. Then he left.

They didn't catch him.

A while before noon he shelled the crew at work with a single wagon, hauling wire back into the gap. But before evening Striker or French, or whoever was in charge on the ground, stationed a rifleman on either of the Capwall upthrusts and with other riders prowling the timber continually Raines had to give it up. Striker, however, still didn't have his wire back into the gap at sundown with his riding men out after Raines and those left in the work crew hugging shelter, afraid of the open ground. And so a day of time had been gained—a single day.

RAINES came into Bar W after nightfall and found only Connie and Dave Kehoe with his wounded, stiffened shoulder at the ranch. The crew and Tulford were working the Bandilleras and had not yet come in. Even the weather was against them. Normally snow would have long since forced stock down from the upper slopes and pocket meadows, and often from the benchland itself. In one way this was lucky with the graze so short along Skull Creek, but not with Striker and his wire crew in the gap. It was ten o'clock before the others appeared, and afterwards Raines had to ride to J M. for a fresh mount. He slept in the brush that night with a blanket roll and enough grub to keep him out for several days. But it worried him about Connie, to have her alone at the ranch like that with only Dave Kehoe and his useless

gun-arm between her and the next move Striker made that way.

The following day was a different story. The first shot Raines fired from the timber brought the swift-answering crack of a rifle, and riders were waiting for him. They ran him over into the bluffs that night where Raines slept on the vast, rocky cliffs that fell a thousand feet into Skull Creek, not daring to light a fire in the cold. Riders kept him on the move now with the dogged persistence of a posse; meanwhile work on the fence was going on, Raines knew. Still this was the only game he could play; hit and run and keep as many of Striker's crew occupied as possible, play for time. He surprised a lone man and took his mount and finally brought that horse into J M, two days afterwards, so worn down that the beast staggered with weariness and stumbled when he climbed from the saddle.

Liscomb had more definite information than Raines' own. Striker's men had put up nearly three miles of solid fence by this time and nailed one strand to the timber all the way across the gap. Between trees choppers were sticking in pine posts, less durable than juniper, but just as stout for a few seasons. There was a rumor, Liscomb said, that Bannion money had purchased the Teacup brand which would give Striker another kind of foothold in the country. John McKavett, riding up from town that evening, had brought his foreman this information.

"But why ain't Striker himself on the job there in the gap?" Liscomb asked, shivering in the dark of the corral.

"Who says he ain't?"

"Some tracks we been seein' in the Bandilleras and over in the far roughs," Liscomb answered. "Yesterday one of my men sighted him and French ridin' the high ridges. Close enough so there couldn't be no mistake."

Raines didn't know the answer. But if Striker had been riding the Bandilleras he was after something there. He climbed on the fresh horse Liscomb saddled. He needed rest and a night's uninterrupted sleep, and a hot cooked meal most of all. But another dawn was coming, and daylight found him lying in a tangled thicket from which he could look into the gap. The sky was overcast this morning with a thin,

gray film through which the rising sun showed like a pale, leaden disk. Below him now he could hear the distant ring of axes and the closer noise of shovels in the timber and steadied the rifle up. But he knew it was no use; this fence job was too nearly finished. Then he heard his horse whinny.

Raines had left the animal fifty yards back in the brush. In a minute he heard horsemen coming through, and knew some far lookout had seen the animal and now they had him without a mount. He started out across the open, running hard toward a farther stand of young jackpines. A rifle cracked; he dove into the feathery young pines and crawled. The shot had cut through the flesh of his thigh; it felt numb and then fire-hot. He turned and crawled straight up the slope, and a rider charged through within ten yards of him while he stopped dead-still. He drew a hand away from the wound; it was all covered with blood. Desperate as a trapped rabbit, he ran again and dropped under a clump of laurel. Sooner or later this thing had been bound to occur in one way or another.

He crawled on through the laurel and over bare rocks at a distance and fell into a deep crevice, still clinging to the rifle. He lay here while riders crisscrossed the slope below and then above and gradually moved off. But twice again that morning they came back, searching for him like a pack of sniffing hounds. The wound was not deep, not serious, but it was full of dirt and had bled a lot. Raines bandaged it as best he could with a neckerchief and a wad of cloth torn from his shirt. He dared not move before dark.

The sky thickened overhead during the afternoon and the wind veered due north. It was going to storm. Bar W and J M riders had gathered around three thousand head of cattle which they were holding on the lower benches, making no attempt to drag the outlands or comb the Bandilleras clean. Bad weather earlier in the season would have forced stock into Skull Creek, despite the scant feed there this year. But heavy snowfall across the benchland now could only hurry the ruin Striker had begun with his fence across the gap. Striker had gambled on the weather too, and won. There was a big patrol of riders moving

along the fence line below when dusk finally fell.

Raines crawled out and began that long, long journey afoot toward Bar W. The wound in his thigh had stiffened and each step brought its fresh twinge of pain. Small luck would have put some J M or Bar W hand across his path with a horse; both crews were down here somewhere on the benches tonight, he knew. But now his luck was all gone. He felt sick and weak from hunger and loss of blood, and the insistent knowledge that this fight was the same as finished. How long afterwards he reached Bar W he did not know.

HE stood off in the night and roused the dog which brought Tulford out. They were holding the cattle in one big herd just to the west of the gap where there was partial shelter from the wind, Tulford told him, and he alone had come back to stay with Connie. If the storm broke before morning he would be taking Connie into town. But here was warmth and food and the medicines to tend his wound, and shelter for at least a little while. Raines limped into the big kitchen beside Tulford, not trying to understand the expression on Connie's face.

"But don't you know? Hasn't anybody told you about it yet?" she was asking him a minute later. "French is carrying a warrant for you, charging you with the murder of Anse McKavett that night. French has been here twice with men enough to help him search the ranch. I told him Anse hadn't been killed in the cabin. I—"

"You told Bowie French that you were there?"

"Yes, I told him everything."

Jeff Raines thought this over, conscious of the nearness of this girl and all the things that she stirred up in him which, like the old hopes and ambitions that had died in the Santiago, must presently be put aside in turn, if never forgotten. It was a tightening in his throat that made his voice sound rough and almost harsh: "That's more than I know, Connie. What did happen there?"

"Anse had something—something he wanted to sell," she told him. "He rode out of the brush and stopped me on the trail into town; he was afraid of being

caught back in this country, you know. He claimed that what he had was worth as much to Bar W as Bill Striker, and let me know that it would be the one that could pay him the most who got it. He seemed very confident about the whole thing. I was to meet him alone at the cabin later where we could talk terms and he'd explain."

"You don't know what it was?"

"I waited at the cabin all afternoon for him. When he rode in it was nearly dark. Anse didn't climb from saddle; he fell. I managed to get him inside to the bunk and take off his coat. There was an old lamp I'd noticed on a shelf. While I was lighting it he began coughing and then lay still. I started down into the ravine after water. But I knew he must be dead, and then I heard you coming. I was scared. . . . You know the rest."

Raines did. "Could John McKavett have had any part in Anse's deal?"

"Never." Tulford shook his head across the table. "Anse was the black sheep of the family, John's half-brother. They'd had trouble years ago over money Anse stole. Both J M and his store in town John McKavett built the hard way, from the bottom up. Two men couldn't have been less alike. I always thought it was more to spite John than for any other reason that Anse took up with Lem Bannion. But Anse was only one of five-six others that Bannion hired to homestead land across the gap and sell to him later. Then the rustlin' started."

Raines was wolfing food, listening at the same time. Something started ticking in his mind. "Look! Whatever it was Anse McKavett had to sell, Striker didn't get it either. Somehow it all fits into this business." The thought grew in his mind. "Anse leave the country pretty sudden that other time?"

"Fast as a horse could carry him."

Raines tucked the thought away again and went on eating, soaking in the warmth and light in this room the same way he took in food, trying to get enough of it and enough of the sight of Connie to last him for a while out there in the black, wind-swept night. He knew he had to move again and keep on moving. The warrant in no way surprised him; they couldn't possibly make a case against him

in court, and there was no chance at all of his being taken into custody alive. Striker was after his blood and his neck, all of which Jeff Raines thoroughly understood. Tulford had two horses tied in shelter of the house wall, one for Connie, and he offered Raines his own. It was a big line-back dun, shaggy and hard-headed and tough as a mule. And when he left Bar W in the teeth of that night Raines was lining for the Bandilleras.

VII

IT snowed for a while sometime before dawn and the hard, frozen footing underhoof became worse. The dun kept slipping and finally fell and in the dark scramble Raines reopened the flesh wound in his thigh. When he got back into the saddle he could feel warm blood sopping into the bandage Connie had given him; then the bandage stiffened and bothered him. He was following the edge of the rough country, searching first to the east and then back to the west for the small spark of a fire that must be up there somewhere among the slopes and ridges, if he could sight it. But the snowfall abruptly cut off his visibility, and he knew there was not much time before morning and so began to climb.

He could hear the wind lashing and screaming along the top slopes, but it was a while before he got up into it. When the full force hit him it knocked the breath back in his throat and seemed to compress his lungs and he could feel the dun heave against each blast. The snow had stopped by this time, but the gale whipped up the fresh fall and threw it across the ridges like buckshot. A man or his horse could not stand much of this, and he had to drop below the crest again for shelter. Dawn found him working across into another canyon, leading the dun from time to time on legs that felt like frozen stubs in his boots, and he wondered now how it was that last night's walk across the level benches had seemed so bad. The wound was there in his thigh; it pained him and he set his teeth and tried to forget it—forget everything except the job before him here.

It had been a long-shot chance that he would sight some far-off speck of a camp-

fire last night, but it was a longer chance that he could even locate Striker and whoever was with him now before the storm settled down in earnest. But if this hunch of his amounted to anything, Striker wasn't going to abandon the search so long as he could move a horse across the ranges, and Raines had his own good idea of the methodical way the man had worked. What Striker was looking for was bound to be on this side of the Bandilleras; he knew that much. Liscomb's man had sighted him and French on the high summits; they would be working lower now.

So strong was that hunch that it had become practically a certainty in Jeff Raines' mind since he had left Bar W. It now seemed to him that he should have guessed the truth yesterday when Liscomb had first told him Striker had been tracking through the Bandilleras, when all the trouble was back in the gap. There wasn't any other way to fit the facts together, so that they all fell into place with Connie's story and the way Anse McKavett had died to form a perfect chain of circumstance. It had to be that way, Jeff Raines kept telling himself.

There was no time for him to scour out this land himself for the same thing Striker wanted; he had to take advantage of Striker's movements and somehow try to get there at the kill which meant he must first locate Striker. He climbed and dipped over another side ridge divide, hugging what rocky shelter he could find. He was watching for tracks in the fresh snowfall, studying the contour of the land and trying to figure out where he could most likely cut Striker's sign. He could cover a lot of country that way, but the day was wearing on. If anything the force of the wind was increasing with no abatement of the cold. The sky was low and solid, black as smoke from horizon to horizon, and the storm behind it was certainly going to break with all the fury old-time cattlemen dreaded before another night.

But it was no track on the ground, no immediate sight of distant horsemen across other summits that finally placed the man he was looking for. It was a thin, far-off gunshot, borne on the hurtling wind. Raines pressed out along the canyon side

he was following, trying to widen his view. He realized then that the higher peaks northward were all a-smother, and almost at the same instant he saw a horse standing in the canyon below. The smother about those peaks came toward him with a lateral, blinding swiftness, but just before it hit he saw the speck of another rider dropping into the canyon head and knew this man had seen the same thing he did and the shot had been a signal. The stinging, icy fury of the storm enveloped him within a minute after that and neither reins or spurs could hold the dun into it, and he drifted to the south on his way down into the canyon.

Below, the lashing pines and walls broke the full impact of the blast and at last he could drive against it, half the time unable to see the ground underhoof. It was a taut-stretched rope and the dun stumbling over it that led him to that horse he had seen from above, and now Raines knew there was absolutely no doubt about the way this thing added up. The beast, a bony, skeleton animal, staked within reach of water but with every spear of dry grass, every stem and brush leaf devoured within the compass of the forty-foot length of its rope was a pitiable sight, and the first thing Raines did was to cut the rope. Immediately the pack of the storm blotted out sight of the shambling beast, and Raines worked on into timber ahead where he tied the dun. The search was not yet finished, but its end was not far off. He unlooped his saddle rope and stretched it out from tree to tree, to form a barrier he could find again.

He almost walked into another saddled horse, standing hunched with its tail backed into the storm at the timber edge. He circled around a bit to see if there were others, and while he was at this the plain odor of smoke reached his nostrils. He turned and plowed straight into the blow of the wind and within twenty yards came against the low log face of a tumble-down shanty. The smoke came from a partly fallen chimney, blown straight out across the roof, and in the swirl and leeward eddies Raines leaned against the wall, gathering what strength was in him and warming his board-stiff gun hand against the skin of his chest. There was no particular hurry now. Ear against the

wall, he could hear no sound of conversation inside, and evidently the man in there was alone.

BUT when he hit the sagging old door in the front of the place Raines was going in fast behind a drawn gun. A blazing fire under the crumbling shelf of an old fireplace struck his eyes first with the broad, wide-shouldered figure of Bowie French faced toward it, arms spread out to the warmth. French came around on bent knees, but he didn't have a chance to draw. On the dirt floor beside French lay a packsaddle and boxes, those boxes overturned with the litter of grub and gear that they had contained spilled about. There was no bunk in the room, but a mat of pine boughs, cut about a week ago, were heaped in one corner with a roll of blankets nearby. A rifle in scabbard leaned against the wall there.

Raines came on in, forcing the door shut behind him without shifting the muzzle of his gun. Raines said to French, "Nice and cozy, ain't it? Too bad Anse McKavett never got back to his permanent camp."

"Huh! What're you talkin' about?"

"You know what I'm talkin' about! Shift that left hand of yours around careful, unbuckle your gunbelt and step back. Once before I nearly killed you, Bowie; I won't hesitate again. You know what I want."

"Lissen! Lissen," French protested thickly, "I just now drifted down the head of this canyon, just as the storm broke. I found this shack and I ain't been here more'n ten minutes. A man's got to have shelter."

"What else did you find? Raines squatted and pulled French's gun from holster where it had been dropped on the floor. He backed away, flipped open the weapon's cylinder and tossed the shells aside. He threw the Colt's into the fire then, and watched French. "What else did you find?" he repeated. "What's that bulge in your shirt front?"

"Now, lissen, Jeff! You got no right—"

"French, if I have to come after you, I'll give you the most merciless pistol whipping you ever had in your life before I knock you cold and take what I'm after,"

Raines said. "I haven't forgot that play you made in the pass. You can take your choice. But if you don't decide before I reach you nothing will stop me. Make up your mind!"

"All right, all right." French reached inside his shirt and drew out a small oilskin-wrapped packet which he tossed to the floor. His voice became husky-raw in his throat. "How did you know?" he asked.

"There was just one thing that would have kept you and Striker searchin' this country when all the trouble was back in the gap," Raines told him. "That was what Anse McKavett had and wanted to sell. When I learned about that last night two and two began to add up and make four. Anse hadn't been livin' in that cabin where he died, which meant he had to have a camp somewhere in the country not too far away. He'd left here with a rustlin' charge hangin' over him and didn't want to be noticed which meant the camp was hid. It looked like that was what you and Striker must be searchin' for, see? By the time I'd got that far I knew it couldn't be anything else. There was just one thing that important which Anse could have had to sell—his homestead papers!"

"All right. There they are," French said. "He had 'em hid away in one of the pack boxes. But look here, Jeff! Figure a little bit farther—what's this thing worth, just between you and me? Bannion and Anse McKavett once made a deal. The government wouldn't give Anse title to his land if it could be shown Bannion had any strings on it before patent was issued, and right after Anse got his patent that rustlin' business broke. He run out on Bannion without deeding over the land. So there it is! There's a quarter-mile hole right in the middle of Bannion's strip of owned land across the gap. Bannion never told Striker till he was in too deep to quit. So what's the knowledge of these-here papers worth to us?"

Raines picked up the papers in their oilskin-wrapped packet, studying French with a plain contempt. "So now you're talkin' a deal between the two of us?"

"Why not?" French asked. "If nothing leaks Striker breaks two outfits, J M

and Bar W, before another spring. That opens up the whole benchland with Skull Creek behind. With the Teacup iron and Bannion money Striker grabs the range. What d'you figure that is worth to him? Or on the other hand what would that information be worth to J M and Bar W before both go broke? They could bring a marshal in and cut the fence wide open."

Raines watched him thoughtfully, finally feeling the warmth of that fire penetrating his heavy clothing. It spread a drowsy weakness through his muscles and made him doubt that he could buck that storm outside again for any length of time. His wound began to ache. He said, "Where's Striker, French? You can't buy me off and you're stalling! That was a signal shot you fired up in the canyon head just before the storm broke," and from the change in French's little, wide-spaced eyes had his answer.

He backed up to the wall behind, pulled the rifle there from its scabbard. He said, "Stay where you are!" and reached the door, yanking it open against the rising, driven shriek of the storm. This filled the world outside; there was no other sound.

The cold again was like the slap of an icy blanket, and in the sudden gray-white swirl Raines very nearly collided with the other man who came head down toward the door. Actually it was Striker who saw him first and recognized him and dove toward the nearer, outside corner of the shack, yanking off one mitten with his teeth. Clegg was following within sight of Striker, and the waspish, youthful gunman was carrying a rifle from his saddle. Clegg pressed a gloved forefinger through the trigger guard, swinging the rifle out and up and firing while he dropped flat to the ground.

Raines' shot hit him like that, quartering down from the collarbone into his chest, and Clegg's rifle pitched its muzzle into the snow. Striker, behind now, shot once and immediately afterwards lost sight of Raines in the sweeping blizzard pack and started after him like a wolf. French, in the doorway, ran across toward Clegg and grabbed the rifle from his slack, opened hands and went down-wind with the storm. Three or four yards was the

limit of any visibility out in the screaming sweep of it, and the smother in the timber was dark as late twilight.

Raines thought he had missed the guide rope stretched across through the timber entirely and plowed into it hard enough to double him over. He followed the rope on then and found the dun and blindly climbed into saddle, giving the dun its head and the spurs. The rest was up to this shaggy, hard-mouthed animal, foaled on the benches in old Ed Warner's day, and whatever guiding instinct of direction there was in the beast. How deep the drifts would be piled up across the open country Raines had no idea. Bar W was a log house and a bunkshack, somewhere distant across that wide, snow-swept plain, which could be passed by at twenty yards or half that distance and never seen. Eastward lay the bluffs and their broken, rocky cliffs. But anyhow Jeff Raines knew that he wouldn't be alive another morning if he spent the night out in this.

VIII

IT was a huge, roaring fire that rose up before his eyes with men and horses standing around it, and the wind was no longer pushing at him with its frozen, cutting blast, driving past like some screeching banshee thing that waited for him not far ahead. It was like a great, still vacuum here through which the snow kept sifting down, thick and powdery, with the rush of the blizzard wind far overhead, lashing at the timber tops and towering head rocks above with a noise like pounding surf. This was Skull Creek. Tailed into the storm, the dun had brought him across those upper miles, past Bar W and down through the gap into the creek.

Raines wasn't thinking now about the wire or how he had got through it. "What's the matter, you all helpless?" Tulford was yelling at the men. "Two of you boys get him out of saddle. Warm some blankets here against the fire. . . . No, don't bring him too near the blaze yet. That windward cheek's frostbit; most likely his feet are too. Snow's the thing for that. Rake out more coals under the coffee pot. Plenty of hot coffee later, and where's that whisky bottle, Ewen? . . . Jeff!"

Both Bar W and the J M crews were here, and it was Liscomb and Bick who hauled him out of saddle with Tulford giving a hand. "Here! Here in my pocket," Raines told Tulford. "Take a look at Anse McKavett's homestead papers. And when I leave, Tulford, there's one thing I want. I want that line-back dun. Take care of him."

He learned about the fence later, lying there beside the blaze wrapped in hot blankets with these riders gathered round, drinking steaming coffee, the fragrance of cigarettes mingling with wood smoke and the sifting steady snowfall, the wild wind above. Tulford had got another horse and saddle from J M yesterday morning and taken Connie into town, and was back with the herd above the wire when the full force of the storm descended. They were holding three thousand and more head of cattle there, all bunched together, planning to cut the wire when the storm settled down or it was dark again. Like that the blast of the blizzard caught them.

"You could see it reachin' down from the peaks, like fine mist that blotted out everything. Maybe ten minutes warnin'," Tulford explained. "The boys made some attempt at first to drive for the timber; it was useless. All this stock is weather-wise; it's been raised right here. Skull Creek's the winter range with shelter under the bluffs. The old steers took the lead into the gap. Nothin' could have turned 'em after that, not with the press of the herd behind. Striker's line crew must have been waitin' for us. Hell, you couldn't see ten feet! You couldn't even hear a gun. I never knew when we crossed the wire; the herd had just took out a whole section of it and plodded through like that. The same hole the dun must have brought you through tonight."

"I reckon," Raines said, "it's just about finished."

"We'll ride into town tomorrow with these papers of Anse's. But I already know John McKavett was Anse's only livin' kin, and the land patent will go to him," Tulford added. "A quarter-mile hole in Bannion's strip of holdings across the gap makes the whole thing worthless. It breaks Striker's scheme in the very middle with no hope at all that he can

pull the two ends together. There never was a squarer man than John McKavett. Besides, he owns J M. Yes, it's all finished."

Except for the memories that would go with him when he left this country, Jeff Raines thought. Memories were never finished.

He rode the dun into town with Tulford, late the next day. It was still snowing, but the wind had blown itself out that early morning and now there was only the flaky fall which piled up on the brim of a rider's hat and whitened his shoulders and stuck to his chaps. The two crews had started spreading cattle along the creek at daybreak, each pair of men heading for some yonder snug-walled cabin where they would hole up till spring except for occasional trips to town, riding the winter range. Raines knew it was time for him to be traveling, the way the snow kept coming down.

"Sure, sure," Tulford muttered, as they came into the street. "But before you leave you'll want to say goodbye to Connie. Connie's up at the hotel."

Raines met the old man's gaze squarely, and shook his head. "No. No, I reckon you had best say that goodbye for me, Tulford. I think you'll understand. I'll just buy the few things I need and drift the same way I came. You know the kind of a man I am, Tulford; you saw it the first time you looked at me. There have been other gunfights, other trouble. Striker wasn't any stranger to me when we met here. It's a road that some men travel, whether it's their choice or not. I've gone too far to stop."

"Connie might have a word or two to say about that."

"Tulford," Raines said solemnly, "don't torment a man with the impossible. Have a little mercy!"

SPIKE MARLEY was moving his horse out, stopped in the mouth of the livery stable with a raised boot tucked into stirrup, when he saw Striker and Bowie French ride into sight through the steadily falling snow. The two were coming directly up from the creek which had its own significance to Marley. French said, "Hello, Spike," as he came into the stable without saying

anything. He dropped his reins for the hostler to pick up; and then he swung around and came back toward Marley. Marley waited beside his horse.

"Where d'you think you're goin'?" Striker asked.

Marley hunched the shoulders under his windbreaker. "You fired me after that bunkhouse fight with Raines," he said. "I been waitin' around to see what happened. Just in case you don't already know it, there's a hole that would take a regiment in the gap fence where that herd of cattle on the benches come through after the storm broke. Now you got a winter-long fight on your hands at best. Me, I'm readin' the signs and movin' out. But if you want Jeff Raines—"

"You seen him?"

"Yes. I seen him stop in front of McKavett's store with Tulford. About five minutes ago."

Marley had no knowledge of what had happened in the Bandilleras, nor the certain defeat to Bill Striker that Raines had carried with him if he reached Skull Creek through the storm. But his eyes were shrewd and knowing and he recognized what was going on inside Striker from the set of the man's big body and the raging violence that became plain on his face. Striker made no move for a moment; then he whirled on French.

"Get down!" he ordered. "You've still got that warrant. We're going after him. That's one last thing that I intend to do!"

French remained in the saddle, slowly shaking his head. "How long after the facts are known, Striker, before somebody begins to figure out who did kill Anse McKavett?" French asked. "Raines and the Warner girl give each other alibis at the cabin that night when Anse died. Both know he'd traveled some distance from where the shot was fired. It will be plain you had more reason to kill Anse McKavett than any other. Anse threatened your whole scheme unless you could buy him out and that would cost you plenty. How long before somebody adds it up just like that and knows the truth, Striker?"

French continued to shake his head. "No, I know when I'm licked and beaten. This deputy star I'm wearin' ain't worth

the tin it's made of on my shirt front and never has been if it come to a show-down. Like Marley here, I'm ridin' while there still is time. You'd be wise to do the same."

Striker said nothing. He stared at Bowie French till he was finished and for a while after that, understanding the words but either not trusting himself to make a reply or saving it till later; and then he wheeled away with that dead-white look unchanged on his face. Just inside the stable mouth he stopped again and opened the flaps of his coat and shifted his gunbelt around so the holstered weapon hung ready and easy for the draw in front of him. He walked out into the snow and moved away along the street.

Raines was coming down steps from the raised front of McKavett's store with a roll of blankets under one arm and the stuff he needed for the trail in a loose, half-filled gunnysack in his other hand when he saw the indistinct shadow of a man moving sidewise directly across street. Striker had turned the corner and lingered here, against the face of opposite buildings. The distance was too far between them through the flaky drift of the snow and the half-light of this day to make recognition easy. With one eye on the man, Raines came out from the steps and crossed to the hitch rail where the dun stood.

At the same time the man across street started straight toward him, and as Striker took the step down from the opposite curb Raines knew him. He had time enough to drop the duffle he was carrying and no more when Striker fired and splinters from the shot ridged up from the hitch rail in front of Raines, and he felt them strike the back of one hand. Striker shot again and came on at a run, and it took Raines that long to get his gun out. He was bending and fired below the hitch rail then, dropping to duck under it with his body. Raines fired a second time from that position with the hard, storm-dulled echoes of all this filling the street solidly.

Somewhere behind him Striker's third shot broke out window glass. But the

man had stopped in that same instant, swung half-around in his tracks. Striker came on at a crazily weaving gait; now Tulford was yelling something from the doorway of the McKavett store. Raines was standing out a pace from the hitch rail; he stood there with his gun up, but did not fire again. Striker's next shot plowed into the snow directly in front of him. The man was sagging over, his knees bent and he went down abruptly, settling into the snow with a lifeless yielding of muscles. Striker had played his game out to the finish. Raines walked no nearer.

Townsmen and the few riders in town were coming out of doorways along the street, running up toward the scene, shouting their excited questions. All of this Jeff Raines had seen before; it had been the same in the Santiago: a roar of sudden shots, men running along a street; only there it had been the beginning, not the later, bitter end. He wanted to travel now and travel fast. He wished there were no memories.

Tulford came up behind him while he was tying his blankets on the dun, and he said to the old man savagely, "See what I mean? It's like that! Once a man starts on that road he cannot stop and he cannot turn. Somewhere ahead is his boothill; that's all he can be sure of. Far or near, it's all the same."

"No, there's another thing, Jeff," Tulford answered. "Connie, you try and explain it to him."

He turned and saw her standing beside Tulford, breathless from her run from the hotel and bareheaded in the snowfall. There was that scared look Jeff Raines had seen in her eyes before, but when his own met hers it disappeared. She reached out her hands and took hold of his arms and came up close to him, stirring him as she always had. Her eyes were promising him things that he didn't dare to believe, mixing up all his emotions and lumping them in his throat. She had a woman's secret way of knowing her own power.

"No, Jeff. There's always a place for a man to stop," she said. "And yours is here at Capwall Gap."



HELL'S HELMSMAN

By ALBERT RICHARD WETJEN

Nobody knew Taggart's past. Nobody cared, for he was on the beach, and there he stayed. Until the day that the horror craft creaked in the cove and swung, chilling tropic-hot blood.

THREE white men stood on the white beach looking out over the sea. Here and there the sheer blue was dotted with white as a long swell broke about an up-thrust jag of coral. But beyond the last reef, the sea stretched smooth and deep to the far eath-rim. Birds wheeled over the clean blue sea, and the warm trade

winds made the palms of Kia Island bend and nod in the soft rhythm. And it scarcely stirred the sea surface to a ripple.

Down on the beach, natives were running canoes out into the water, for the white wings of the trader brig had been sighted far out on the horizon. Behind the three white traders natives grouped and chattered. The arrival of the supply ship was always an event for celebration on small Kia Island.

Jackson, one of the Australian traders, took his pipe out of his mouth and spat on the sand. Then he said: "Only four days overdue. . . . Not bad." He was a burly bearded man in creased and grubby whites. And in place of a belt he wore a wide sash of deep blue silk. His was the trading house in the grove of pandanus near the native village on the edge of the shallow lagoon.

The other man, Lieber, nodded. Lieber was a sturdy, fair haired individual with a little waxed mustache. Somewhat of a dandy. His whites were immaculate. His trading house stood across the lagoon from Jackson's, and the firm he represented was one of the greatest in all the south.

The last man, Asee, was of hidden origin. He was clean shaven and talked at least four languages. He always had money. He traded on his own account and whenever a strange ship came to Kia Island he remained indoors and would not come out at all or greet anyone. He might have been a renegade Frenchman, or a Russian. He had a native wife and two children, and every night, drunk or sober, he dressed for dinner.

He did not hide when the brig's sails were sighted. He knew she was only the supply ship from Australia and that she would bring canned foods and new liquor and week-old Sydney papers and some from Europe a great deal older than that. There would be gossip and much laughter and, more important than all, a little mail. She would only stay for one day, long enough to pick up what cargo had been accumulated during the past four months. Then she would leave and be seen no more until four more months had passed.

The groups of natives edded and parted and another white man appeared. You would have had to look closely to be sure

he was a white man. His beard was shot with gray and matted and tangled together. His skin, arms and bare legs and throat and breast were sullen bronze with the sun. His hat was rudely made of tappa cloth and for a belt to hold up his ragged, dirty pants he wore a fragment of twisted rope-yarn.

He ran one shaking hand over his lips and croaked, "She's four days late, heh?" The other white men looked round abruptly and as abruptly looked away again. No one answered. No one ever answered Taggart. Not that he cared. He shaded his eyes with shaking hands and looked at the brig coming up to the anchorage.

She meant little to him, perhaps a drink cadged from the supercargo or captain, perhaps a few cans of food from the galley if Ah Moy, the Chinese cook, was still holding cook's berth. No mail, no papers. At least no papers until the other traders had worn them to rags. Taggart, as all the Louisade Archipelago knew, was down and out, working the beaches, and a thing for laughter even among the natives.

The three *white* white men never bothered with Taggart.

A whaling ship, stopping for water, had dropped him on Kia Island. The whaling captain said he was a stowaway out of Brisbane. Taggart himself said he had been very drunk or he would never have gone to sleep on a whaling ship. The captain, who was very proud, struck him across the mouth for that. And Taggart took it and never whimpered. Only he wiped the blood from his lips and shambled off along the sand and went to sleep under the palms.

In time the traders regarded him as they might have regarded a dog, and sometimes, when the utter loneliness palled, and when they were sick of each other's company, they would open a bottle of cheap trade gin and get him drunk.

HE had been in command of a ship-of-the-line once. He had led the review before the Royal yacht one memorable year. He had piled the same ship on the reefs off Motu-Iti Passage and they broke him and took away his honor. The girl he'd been going to marry, and whose father was an admiral, gave him

up after that. He did not blame her. After half a bottle he would explain he did not blame her. He had always drunk and done foolish things, but nothing serious, they must understand, until the Motu-Iti affair. After that, chaos. He went into the freighters and lost them steadily. The *Royal Anne* off Torres Strait, the *Molucca* in the Middle Passage, the *Bruno Karl Grosser* on the coast of Malabar. Always drunk. Schooners claimed him and after that Chinese junks, which is as low as a master-mariner can drop. Then even Chinamen spat on him and refused him command.

He drifted. He always drifted. He went from port to port, beach to beach. He lost everything save a tinge of his queer, haughty accent and his capacity for liquor. Kia Island was the last place, but he didn't care, didn't care at all. He was utterly damned. He didn't care who knew it. There was not a chance he could come back, not a single chance. And he thanked the traders for their gin and went over the past again and brought in women and wild nights in wilder cities and dark things whispered and sometimes accomplished.

The traders for a while would be amused and finally disgusted. And when Taggart was completely drunk they would throw him from the veranda where they would be sitting and call the house-boys to roll him among the hogs that he might sleep and sober up. Then—back to beach-combing.

On the beach now, standing behind the traders, he said again, "She's four days late, heh?" and chuckled. He knew how eagerly the others waited for the brig and how they fretted when she was overdue.

He moved off down the sand to where the canoes were pushing off. He approached three or four and was thrust aside, but at last he found a place and went dancing over the swells toward the incoming vessel.

She came to and her anchor chain roared into the water, gradually straightening and finally remaining still. A whaleboat dropped down the hull. Blocks creaked and ropes whined angrily through rusty sheaves. Four oars lifted and fell in steady rhythm and the whaleboat went toward the beach with the supercargo and the brig's captain in the stern sheets. On

the brig's deck, natives were breaking cargo out of the hatches and Taggart, coming up the rope pilot ladder, slouched 'midships to the galley.

Ah Moy shuffled across the greasy floor and stirred thin soup with a wooden ladle. His slant-eyes twinkled and his thin lips puckered soundlessly when he saw who his guest was.

"Lo," muttered Taggart. He glanced up and down the deck and then slipped into the galley. "Got any chow, Ah Moy?"

The Chinaman allowed the wooden ladle to rest against the side of the big iron kettle while he re-coiled his pigtail.

He said, "Huh!" shortly, and pulled open a drawer to disclose some canned goods, scraps of bread and biscuits and some boiled mutton in a tin canister. There were cockroaches crawling over everything, but Taggart tapped them from the meat and the bread and started to eat.

Ah Moy dished him out some soup and gave him a spoon. He was the only man who came in contact with Taggart who did not betray contempt or scorn. Perhaps he understood. Perhaps he could see something inside the other's tortured soul that made him sympathize. If so he gave no outward sign, made no comment. He seldom spoke at all for that matter. It was whispered by some that Ah Moy himself was high-born, had once worn a button of rank. But that was only gossip and may or may not have been true.

AFTER eating and grunting thanks, Taggart pulled a small fiber sack from somewhere inside his ragged cotton shirt and unfastening it brought forth a small nugget of almost pure gold. He rolled it on the bench, picked up a few tins of canned meats and vegetables and fruits and looked at Ah Moy. The Chinaman patted his pigtails and pursed his lips. He shook his head. Taggart nodded, picked up the nugget, replacing the sack and left the galley carrying the tins.

Going aft, his shirt bulging with new-gained possessions, Taggart ran into a scowling mate.

"Hey!" said that harassed man, keeping one eye on the working natives. "Hey! You here again? . . . Ain't the booze an' climate got you yet?"

"Not yet," responded the beach-comber with a trace of irritation. "Can't you all wait?"

"Wait? Hey! What you got in yer shirt?"

"Grub." Taggart cringed from him.

"Canned stuff ag'in? Hey! What d'yer think this is? Free lunch? Take them tins back."

The slouching, tattered figure whined, "Only a few cans, mister. Only a few cans. An' I haven't tasted white man's grub since you were here last."

The mate scowled and snapped an oath at a native who dropped a case of small hand-mirrors. "Hey!" He turned to Taggart. "Get out of my sight. . . . Damn loafer. South Sea's filled with your sort. Hey! Move along now, I'm busy."

Taggart went on aft. On the poop he found the half-caste steward and fumbled again with the little sack from his shirt. Whispers. The mate was intent on the unloading. Both men descended to the saloon. A small nugget changed hands and the steward found a half-empty bottle in a locker. A glass half-filled. Another drink. Then the nervous steward ushered Taggart on deck again. He leaned on the taffrail and waited for the supercargo to come aboard.

The supercargo was busy figuring with a notebook and pencil when the beach-comber cornered him by the break of the poop.

"Go away," he said. "Taggart, you're a damned nuisance. I haven't anything for you."

"I've some gold here." Taggart pulled out the little sack and emptied some more little nuggets in his palm. "I want a case of gin. They're worth that."

THE supercargo poked among the nuggets with a bony finger. "Where did you get that?" He was suspicious.

"Got it from a native."

"Liar! Stole it from one, I suppose. . . . You've sunk pretty low. . . . I'll have a case sent ashore for you. Put it back in the bag."

The bag changed hands. Taggart's eyes gleamed. Perhaps it was the liquor he had already consumed. "I'll take the case with me. . . . Canoe waiting alongside."

"All right."

The supercargo turned to go up the companion. Taggart touched his arm. The other waited, surprised.

"What is it now?"

"In the papers . . . last time you were in. . . . I saw them on Jackson's veranda. . . . Something about the *Alice B* cruising through the Solomons and along the New Guinea coast."

The supercargo stared.

"Gone crazy? What about the *Alice B*? That's old man Barlowe's yacht, same guy who owns this brig and a dozen like her."

"I know." Taggart seemed to be having trouble with his breathing. His grimy, sun-drenched face was pale above the ragged beard. He leaned hard on the taffrail. "She was to cruise through the Solomons. . . . Honeymoon trip the paper said. . . . Did she leave Sydney?"

"Left on the tenth of last month," the supercargo snapped.

"Have. . . . Have you got any papers about that time? . . . I'd like to see them."

"Oh, I haven't time to waste. Ask Jackson to let you look through his bunch."

The supercargo was gone, grumbling irritably. Taggart seemed to droop. He stood still for a long time gazing at the deck. Then he roused himself and went 'midships and spoke to the mate. Five minutes later he was bound for the shore with his case of gin and his canned goods. He disappeared into the palms, carrying his liquor on his shoulder and was not seen again until nightfall.

The three traders were entertaining the brig's officers on the veranda of Jackson's house when Taggart appeared. He was very drunk. His bare feet sluffed in the packed earth of the little compound surrounding the house. The black and white dog by the veranda steps rose and growled warningly and Taggart swayed and stopped until Jackson looked up from his whiskey and frowned and said, "Who's there?"

"Thought I'd call," said Taggart. He came forward and the dog's neck hair bristled until Jackson muttered a low command. Whereat the dog subsided and appeared to sleep. Taggart put one foot on the veranda steps and looked up at the men in clean whites gathered round the long table under the oil lamps. He swayed again and his eyes were puffed and

bloodshot. Jackson debated with himself whether he should call the dog on him.

He compromised at last by saying, "What do you want? I've no liquor for you."

"May I see the papers?" The beachcomber was trying to steady himself and keep his voice dignified.

The brig captain said, "There's nothing so disgusting as a white man gone under." Then in a louder tone, "I'd take him and pitch him ashore in Townsville, Jackson, but they'd never stand for it there."

"The man's a pest at times," grumbled Jackson. "Makes the natives laugh to see a white man down with them. . . . Oh, well. What papers do you want?"

"I'd like the Sydney papers round the tenth of last month. I'll take care of them."

Jackson tugged at his neat beard and frowned. He finished his whiskey and said, "Well, ask the house-boy to give them to you. And get out."

"Thank you. I'll return them in the morning."

TAGGART stumbled away round the corner of the house, making for the rear where he could find the house-boy. The brig's supercargo said, thoughtfully, "Wonder if all that stuff he tells when he's drunk is true?"

Jackson cut the end from a long cheroot. "Maybe," he said. "Shouldn't be surprised. There's queer characters down south here."

The supercargo nodded. "He was on board this morning asking me about the *Alice B* and I told him she left Sydney on the tenth. The old man's daughter was married a while ago and they're honeymooning through these parts. Going to call at their trading posts, I fancy."

Alsoe, the trader who spoke four languages and was of unknown nationality, rubbed his smooth-shaven face and traced patterns on the table with the lees of siphoned soda water.

"Old Barlowe was an admiral of the fleet," he murmured.

Lieber, the other trader, laughed harshly.

"So was the father of old Taggart's girl, the one he was going to marry and who threw him over."

Alsoe smiled and went on tracing patterns in the soda water lees. In the palms a night-bird called abruptly and somewhere under the house a rat gnawed coarsely on hard wood.

"That's what I meant."

Jackson looked startled. "Good heavens! You mean that Taggart's sudden interest in the *Alice B* is because Barlowe's daughter—?"

Alsoe nodded slowly. After a moment or two Lieber nodded, with narrowed eyes. The brig captain stifled an exclamation and the supercargo yawned and grunted unbelief.

"Come to think of it," went on Jackson slowly, "it might be. Old Barlowe was in command of the China station once, wasn't he? And Taggart claims he lost that first ship of his off Motu-Iti while under orders from the China station. I always thought he was half-romancing . . . but still. . . ."

Alsoe's soft voice murmured, "There are stranger things. I knew a beachcomber on Nuki Huvi who had married two native women and had a dozen children. When he died we found papers that proved he had a title."

"And say," put in the supercargo's now somewhat excited voice, "I always wondered why Ah Moh treated this Taggart with such generosity when he always chases every other man out of his galley. Maybe Ah Moy knew him once."

"Too far fetched. . . . Oh, well. Poor devil. I'll have him up to dinner some time this week and give him an old suit to wear in place of the rags he's got. Show my sympathy some way. . . . But he gets tiresome." Jackson called for more whiskey and the house-boy brought an unopened bottle.

By the light of the only stump of candle he possessed Taggart was then scattering over the thick pile of Sydney papers with feverish excitement. He started from the earliest paper and went through, scanning only the marine news until he found what he sought. It was a somewhat long item, stating that the steam yacht *Alice B* had left that day for a protracted cruise in the south seas bearing on board the owner's daughter and her newly married husband.

Taggart read that over four times and

then went back through the papers, the news pages, until he came to a tall photograph and a column about a certain wedding. Thereafter he sat alone and still and silent under the stars while the candle flickered and died. Once he groaned. Then at last he gathered the papers into a neat bundle and hid them away. In the morning he would return them.

Dawn found him in a stupor by the roots of a huge koa tree with empty bottles around him. He was utterly damned and he knew it.

THE night of the day the *Alice B* anchored off Kia Island, Alsee the trader sent for Taggart. The beach-comber found the other man in immaculate evening dress sitting at his table with the house-boys already laying out the dishes.

"Sit down," said Alsee, waving to a chair. "Hilo, a whiskey and soda for Mr. Taggart."

Taggart grinned so that blackened teeth showed through his beard and he flopped to a chair. He wasn't curious about his being asked to dinner by Alsee. It was the trader's custom when strange ships came to the island and he needed company. He disliked eating alone and he would not go either to Jackson's or Lieber's because they always entertained whatever newcomers happened to wander ashore. Or else they were entertained on board the ship. And because it was unthinkable a native should dine with him, Alsee always sent for Taggart. And just as the beach-comber was, unshaven, dirty, ragged, he would sit with the trader and drink good whiskey and eat good food and talk in a pleasing, cultivated voice of far cities and things of which outcasts should know nothing.

Tonight Alsee was strangely nervous. He fumbled with his bread and forgot to eat his fish. Once he cursed the house-boy in a tongue that was strange to Taggart and was strange also to the frightened native.

The trader muttered once: "I don't see why these confounded tourists should come poking into these out-of-the-way places. . . . Have you seen them, Taggart?"

"Yes." The beach-comber was abruptly silent. He drank two straight whiskies

before continuing. Then he added: "I saw them come ashore, three men and two women. Jackson met them."

"Great entertainer, Jackson," Alsee half sneered. He fingered his glass with fingers that were tense. "A good fellow but somewhat vulgar."

"Yes." Taggart agreed with an effort. Then he managed a smile. "He has an abominable taste in ties." Fine of him to be talking of taste. He whom the native women kept.

"I should think so. Hideous reds and yellow. Brought up in the Bowery, probably."

"Or Limehouse."

"Hasn't the accent. Well, drink up. Who were the three men?"

Taggart shrugged. He set his teeth. Why the devil should he be so nervous himself?

"One of the women was a maid, I thought. The other, I presume, was old man Barlowe's daughter."

"Yes, you knew her," said Alsee unguardedly. Then hurriedly, "But the men!"

"Yes, the men. . . . One must have been . . . her . . . her husband." Taggart seized the decanter with savage energy and poured a stiff drink. "Yes, her husband." He finished the liquor and coughed and felt better. "One was the yacht captain, I judge by his uniform. The other was an army man, dressed in light khaki . . . high rank, I imagine."

Alsee leaned forward and fumbled with his white tie. His other hand was gripping the table corner hard.

"Tall with a brown mustache . . . no, gray now. Long scar down his cheek. Walks with a limp."

"You know him?" Taggart's voice was thickening.

Alsee evaded his eyes. "No, Jackson was telling me about him when he came here to borrow some decent silverware this morning. His name?"

"I didn't hear. I was watching them from behind the palms."

"Of course, I forgot. . . . You wouldn't want to see them . . . on the beach." Alsee drained his glass and laughed harshly. "Damned hot, isn't it? Boy, fill the decanter again. Drink up, Taggart. I feel rather low tonight." They

were both fuddled by the time the moon came up.

Taggart rocked away into the shadows and slumped to the ground on a low mound from where he could watch with swimming eyes the brightly lighted scene on Jackson's veranda where the trader was entertaining his employer's daughter and her husband. Taggart guessed that Alsee watched also, from his own veranda, and in that surmise Taggart had guessed unvarnished truth.

Alsee *was* watching, and as he watched he was cursing thickly under his breath and dreading the morrow and the light. The visitors might tour the island, might inquire about the third trading post.

WHEN dawn came the yacht had gone. But to the dismay of at least two men the daughter of old Barlowe, her husband and her soldier guest remained on Kia Island. Jackson explained when he dropped over to Alsee's place to ask the continued loan of the silverware:

"Yacht's got to take some supplies over to Rossel Island and th' newlyweds want to spend a while ashore. Coming back in a day or so. Better come and meet 'em."

"Thanks. . . I rather not. You know how I hate company." Alsee was profuse with explanations. Jackson did not urge. He had been on Kia Island five years with the other man and was used to his strange craze for not meeting strangers. That evening Taggart dined again with the trader and again they drank to excess. But neither mentioned the visitors this time.

Then, half way through the next morning, a strange schooner lifted her sails over the rim of the sea. She sailed as though weary, despite the fact that the Trade wind blew fresh and strong. Only half her canvas was set. She yawed widely from side to side. When she anchored at last it was in a queer fashion, without coming to, the cable tautening with a jerk and nearly snapping as the vessel checked and the canvas shivered. The native canoes, launched and half-way out to the stranger, turned suddenly and sped for the beach. Jackson and his visitors on the sand shouted to know what was the matter.

But the trader had his answer without waiting for the natives to return. He

knew thirty seconds after he had called. Lieber, hurrying down to the beach knew. Alsee knew. Even Taggart, thick-headed and blear-eyed in the grooves, knew.

Barlowe's daughter, who did not understand, being city bred, cried out, "What is it?" when Jackson ripped out an oath and started to back up the beach. And her husband echoed the cry. But no one would tell them until they were all back in Jackson's house when the army man explained in crisp, harsh words. He had seen villages depopulated and once had commanded a division where the plague was rife. Understanding and nausea was his.

The woman sobbed with new-found terror. The man whimpered with little twinges of fear. The army officer poured liberal drinks and lighted up a black cigar. Jackson had gone down to the beach again with Lieber. They launched a boat, no native would go with them, and went out to the anchored schooner.

AN hour and a half later they all gathered in Alsee's house, all except the visitors from the yacht, all except Taggart. There were the three traders and the native chiefs who were very much afraid.

"It's the schooner *Yoshiwari* out of Brisbane. She's been recruiting blacks in the Solomons and New Guinea," Jackson was explaining. "Plague broke out as they started back for Queensland. Skipper gone, mate gone. Supercargo brought her here and he's got it bad. Kept going with gin I imagine. He said there were one hundred and twenty recruits, not counting the crew, and now there's eighty all told."

Alsee put in, jerkily, "Can't some of the blacks sail her to Australia?"

Jackson shook his head and rubbed his beard. "The supercargo said none of them could navigate. . . . We're up against it. The schooner can't stay here. We ain't got a doctor nor medicine and once the thing started it'd sweep the island like a fire."

"It'll start all right with the wind blowing the stink down. Besides," commented Lieber dryly, "the first swell'll break out the anchor and she'll drift ashore."

"That's it," said Jackson. "Someone's

got to take her to Queensland and quarantine. She can't stay here."

"The yacht could tow her back," suggested Alsee.

Jackson eyed him with some contempt. "You never were a sailor, Alsee. Any ship towing that pest house would likely get swept herself. And d'you think old Barlowe'd stand for it for one minute when his daughter's hanging around? Besides, when will the yacht get back? Every hour means a better chance for the plague to take hold here."

"No doubt of it," muttered Lieber, "we've got to get her away."

Jackson hesitated a moment. Then he turned to one of the anxiously listening native chiefs and said, "Get Taggart." The native padded away. Jackson faced the other traders and his eyes dropped.

He muttered, "Taggart," meaningly.

Lieber looked shocked and caressed his fair mustache. "We couldn't . . . couldn't ask him! We've treated him like a dog. . . . We couldn't ask him to save us."

Alsee rocked back and forth on his heels as though drunk. He said thickly, "I'd go myself . . . go myself." The whiskey bottle went around, natives and all drinking in this crisis.

Taggart came in and was given a glass. He looked at the amber fluid queerly and then sent blood-shot eyes round the room.

"Good whiskey for a bum! I always thought trade gin was good enough."

Alsee laughed grimly. "The plague, Taggart. . . . We've all got the wind up."

Jackson added, "Drink up, man, and have another. . . . Someone's got to take the *Yoshiwari* to Queensland, to Townsville, and get her in quarantine."

"I'm good enough for that, eh?" Taggart laughed and drained his glass. He refilled it and drained it again. "Any beachcomber can be a hero now."

Jackson shifted uncomfortably and kept his eyes on his hands.

"I've a wife and children in Sydney and Lieber's married. . . . It's a chance for you to come back, Taggart. . . . You'd get reinstated in the navy if you got the ship through. We'll write a report. . . ."

Taggart snarled, suddenly bitter. "Who said I was in the navy? . . . You keep your damned mouth shut, Jackson."

The bottle went around again.

Alsee croaked hoarsely, "I'd go myself . . . damned glad to finish . . . but, you see . . . I can't navigate." They all watched him wonderingly, watched his working face and his twisting manicured hands. "You see . . ." There was pain in his eyes. ". . . I'm an army man!"

TAGGART laughed uproariously and slopped whiskey down his shirt front. "Meeting of the damned," he gasped. "Drink, you swine. All cashiered and chucked out. And I suppose it was cards and liquor, Alsee?"

The other two traders drank in silence and puffed awkwardly at their cigars. Several minutes later, during a lull in the argument. Alsee muttered, "Not cards, Taggart." He leaned heavily on the beachcomber's shoulder. "Conduct unbecoming to an officer. . . ."

"Shut up!" Taggart was snarling. "Shut up, all of you. I'll take the *Yoshiwari* to Townsville. . . ."

Jackson and Lieber involuntarily sighed with relief. In spite of the drinking, cold fear had kept them sober. They came round the table and reached for Taggart's hands, though they still avoided his eyes. He waved them drunkenly away. He was going to his death and he knew it, and he knew that they knew it.

Jackson said, huskily, "I'll have a dozen cases sent aboard . . . to keep you company."

Lieber broke in, "Your guests are coming, Jackson." They all turned to gaze from the veranda and saw three white-clad figures coming toward Alsee's house. The visitors were impatient to know what was being done. Alsee uttered a choked cry and staggered a little.

"Go out and stop them, Jackson," he said. "Go out!" But steps were already on the plank walk that led to the veranda steps. Taggart shrank back against the house wall and Alsee stood as though transfixed. The visitors came to the veranda steps and looked up.

The woman cried, nervously, "What are we going to do? Have you decided anything yet?" Her hands clasped and unclasped over a fragment of handkerchief. Her hot eyes searched the faces of the men above. Beside her the army man

uttered a sharp exclamation. He had caught a glimpse of Alsee's face.

Lieber, who was more sensitive than Jackson, put in hurriedly, "Come over to my place and I'll tell you." He led the way and obediently, Jackson and the woman and her husband followed. The army man remained, abruptly oblivious to his surroundings. He went up the steps, one by one, until he confronted Alsee. The trader backed slowly through the door near him, the other man following. The door closed. Taggart wiped sweat from his brow and straightened. He reached for the half-empty bottle on the veranda table and disdainingly tilted the neck. He heard vague voices from behind the closed door. Then he went down through the groves to get ready a canoe. As he went he laughed and rocked in drunken abandon. She had looked at him and hadn't even known him. Hadn't even known him!

HE was launching a canoe, and directing natives in the stowage of the cases of liquor Jackson had sent down, when Alsee came along the sand. The trader's face was drained white. His eyes were feverish orbs in which, strangely, all light seemed gone. His arms were rigid at his side and he walked as though keeping time to some distant music.

He said, "There are many ways for a man to die. . . . Might as well go out decently. . . . I'll come with you, Taggart."

Taggart looked up and nodded and laughed. It was all but over. What little flicker of care he had ever had went out and died. He reached down to an open case and drew forth two bottles. He knocked off the necks with a rock and handed one to Alsee.

"Here's how," he chuckled and started drinking. They were both utterly damned. Alsee laughed queerly and drank, too. Then they went on board the *Yoshiwari*. The dying were screaming out and calling on strange gods. The plague reek was thick in the hot air. The decks were chaos and broody with death. By the wheel was the supercargo, dead as mutton. They pitched him overboard and took another drink.

It was killing work lifting anchor with frantic blacks who didn't know the cable from the fluke. It was worse getting canvas set. But somehow Taggart managed it all, swaying along the deck with a bottle in one hand and a piece of a gin case in the other. At times he stopped to roll a body overside. Once he looked back at Kia Island where he had spent the empty years and he chuckled obscenely.

He was saving a few mad niggers and saving Kia Island, not because he was a hero but because he had loved *her* once. And she had looked at him. And she hadn't even known him. He said to Alsee, when he got back to the poop, "If she'd only stuck by me. . . ." But Alsee cursed the heat and the plague and his own soul and took no heed. He was damned himself.

* * *

On the Louisade beaches to this day you can hear the tale. They tell it along the Townsville waterfront and in many a schooner saloon and fo'c's'le. How Taggart of Kia took the *Yoshiwari* in seven days from the Archipelago to Queensland and quarantine, through the Greater Barrier Reef and safely into harbor. When the doctor came alongside Taggart was at the wheel, kept there because he was lashed to a triangle made of oars. He was far gone with the plague. There were many empty bottles in the scuppers near him. Of Alsee there was no sign. He had died three days back. There were sixty live natives below decks and seven dead on the hatches. As Taggart let go the schooner's wheel and the few remaining native seamen let go the anchor, a lean, slender destroyer came down the bay. She was dark painted and her awnings glistened white in the sun. Uniformed officers paced her little bridge. Alert white men moved on her main deck. She flew a flag of many colors and she was beautiful on the smoothness of the water.

Taggart raised his head and smiled and there was no sign of the drink or of madness in his eyes. He raised one hand in a sort of half-salute as the destroyer went by. He was quite dead by the time a heroic young doctor boarded the reeking ship. And there are so many ways to die.



TRIGGER TRIAL

By Edgar L. Cooper

Swaggering, cocky, unwary young Bart Livermore asked for it. He riled the Rangers, and Rangers like their little joke. They sent him to Cristoval, the Southwest's wild uncurried neck of hell.

CAPTAIN WARREN SHUFORD, of Company E, Pecos Battalion, Texas Rangers, swung a fancily balanced pen, affixed his signature with a flourish to a sheet of tan paper, sealed a neat envelope and handed the envelope over his desk to the lean, rawboned young man who stood before him. Bart Livermore

shoved it deep into his inside coat pocket.

"You are to deliver this to Sergeant Clint Searles," the captain said brusquely. "At Christoval, forty miles west of the Pecos. Your instructions are in the letter, and you will place yourself under command of Sergeant Searles until further orders. He will be at the Old Homestead Hotel. That's all."

Bart Livermore saluted awkwardly, a tiny spark lighting in his cool gray eyes. With something of a swagger he left the headquarters room in Sonora's courthouse, and clumped down the stairs.

The door had no sooner closed behind him than Captain Warren Shuford, Company E, Pecos Battalion, winked and smiled significantly at Sergeant Nate Patton, sitting indolently with his chair propped back against the wall. The smile was more than significant. The noncom grinned understandingly back at his superior. This was going to be good.

Outside, Bart Livermore strode toward his quarters through the bright llano sunshine of a west Texas morning, whistling contentedly with all the enthusiasm of a young recruit en route to his first important mission. He noted but subconsciously the life of the thriving prairie county seat, with its brick bank, filled store windows and numerous saloons; his mind ranged ahead to the assignment the captain had given him. Christoval, across the Pecos! In as wild and uncurried a neck of hell as could be found in the whole Southwest—a region where it was said God and the Law had never gone! And he, Bart Livermore, just turned twenty-one and late of the Kentucky Cumberlands, was bound there!

But if Bart Livermore, as he eagerly packed his war-bag and saddled his hammer-headed sorrel, could have seen and heard what was taking place back in headquarters room in Sonora's courthouse, his bubbling spirits would have deflated like a pricked balloon. Captain Warren Shuford was chuckling to himself and grinning like a fox in anticipation of the entertainment forthcoming from one rookie recruit named Bart Livermore, who had been a member of Company E some two weeks, and had applied for the job garbed in brogans and homespuns, carrying a henskin blanket and brown tow sack across his shoulders.

It happened that there was a vacancy in the company at the time, and Ranger captains hired and fired their men the same as a ranch boss would. And from the first the Kentucky youth had been a fillup of fun and entertainment to the hard-bitten crowd comprising the roster of Company E. He wasn't their kind, and they didn't understand his ways; hence they made him the butt of many a rough and practical joke.

Captain Shuford—himself a dandified, self-admiring man—had signed on the Kentuckian solely as a matter of jest, intending to fire him when the first likely aspirant for the job came along. And now, as a little diversion from a garrison routine that was growing rather monotonous, he was sending the recruit over to Christoval for "the cure."

And that, he mused, would be the finishing touch for young Bart.

The cure, in other words, being a wild-goose chase on a supposedly perilous mission to a bitter-creek town, where outlawry and crime ran rampant and bounty was offered for every Ranger scalp. In the last outpost of law and order, on the fringe of hell! So Livermore's fellow members had primed him. The grizzled veteran, Searles, would see to it that the Kentucky mountaineer got all the "excitement" and "adventure" that he was "honing" for, Shuford reflected gleefully. And when he'd finished the cure, Searles would haze him back to Sonora, the target of much ribald horseplay and the sheepish victim of the frontier sense of humor.

But Bart Livermore was happily ignorant of all that as he rode jauntily out of Sonora at a brisk trot, chewing twist tobacco and whistling tunelessly between his teeth. A .30-30 Winchester lay scabbarded in front of his Padgett saddle, a long-barreled Bisley .44 six-shooter was holstered in a worn belt at his waist, and in his tarp roll behind the cantle snugged four hundred rounds of cartridges. Clad in broad-brimmed hat, flannel shirt and corduroys, range boots and forged spurs, he headed southwest toward his great adventure.

Shuford and Sergeant Patton watched him go. Both were grinning widely. "Let's take a drink," said the captain, "to the education of a damned hillbilly."

AFTERNOON of the following day saw Livermore well west of the Pecos, jogging through the cactus and mesquite country along the thread of trail winding to Christoval.

In spite of the long ride he bore scant evidence of fatigue, and the sorrel gelding easily maintained its mile-eating pace. Since the country he traversed was sparsely populated, he'd scarcely seen anyone all day save an occasional Mexican and his burro. Prickly pear, creosote bush, bunch grass; spiny ridges, rolling hills and brush-choked swales; flash of gliding deer, squawk of chaparral cock, Mex eagles soaring high in the blue. A grim and savage land, yet queerly appealing and fascinating to the youngster in years and tenderfoot in experience who was invading its reaches for the first time.

His thoughts were peaceful and untroubled as he crossed a wide, low swale and dipped into a high-walled cut matted on both sides by thickets of brush, leading to a rising slope beyond. He entered the arroyo—and ran head on into disaster.

A smarting sensation on his right ear, the flat cracking spang of a rifle, the whip-lash split of air from a bullet grazing his head turned his snawy body to woven wire. And even as he threw himself against the off side of his sorrel, a second report went racketing through the coulee and his horse screamed and reared, stumbling as it came down. Bart had his own six-shooter out and his feet clear of the stirrups before the staggering gelding collapsed. He dove behind a clump of chaparral beside the trail before the gulcher could get in a third shot.

Crouching there, his nostrils quivering, his face bleak and metallic, he searched the shallow wash opposite with red fury in his slitted eyes. The shots had come from there. And as he studied the brush-choked gash a third bullet sped from its recesses, slashing through the chaparral leaves above his head. A wispy blue vapor of smokeless powder threaded from the busher's rifle and Bart Livermore, steadying the heavy Bisley with both hands, sent six bullets smashing into the covert in a bracketing hail of death, spacing them with intent expertness. His answer to the treachery.

Came a choky cry, a thud, a threshing, flailing noise in the brush that gradually

lessened. Silence once more settled over the canyon as the Kentuckian still held his crouch, watching the spot intently, a crooked smile on his lips, his thin features flint hard. Somewhere a road-runner cried raucously in the hot stillness.

After a few minutes Bart, his pistol reloaded, got up and walked slowly across the gully. He swabbed his nicked and bloody ear with a bandanna handkerchief. The hammerhead sorrel was finished, with a bullet through its neck, and the youth's mouth tightened as he continued up the slope. There was a dark huddle at the edge of the wash, and Livermore regarded the dead man with no emotion more than a grim satisfaction.

A fellow of some thirty years, in nondescript range garb and unshaven, with a livid scar snaking from his sightless left eye to the corner of his distorted mouth. One bullet had caught him in the throat—a second went through his chest. He wasn't a pretty sight. Farther on and a bit above, his mount stood in a thicket, a wiry, dun cow-pony.

Bart went up to it, swung into the saddle, rode down to where his dead gelding lay, exchanging saddle and gear, throwing the dead man's hull into the brush. Then with a final hawk-eyed survey of the scene, he left the grisly remains of the encounter to the coyotes and buzzards who would gather as soon as he was out of sight.

He rode slowly toward Christoval.

THE sun's last slanting rays were shining through the west windows of the hotel barroom, and the fanged outline of the distant San Miguel hills was a violet and crimson stain on the skyline when Sergeant Clint Searles took his booted feet from the open window, spat a stub of quirly from his lips, and eased his gun belt forward. He was a small man, nearing sixty, every inch grizzled rawhide and whalebone, and tough as jerky. His slaty eyes were squinted thoughtfully as they surveyed the main street of Christoval.

He smiled without mirth. Searles, scarred veteran of the law trail, was under no illusions as to his and Tobe Odom's status in this vicious little settlement. They had been sent there by the adjutant-general for the sole purpose of keeping a narrowed eye on the natives. And their position

was just about as secure as that of a man standing on the scaffold with a rope around his neck. Two men against a mob, to hold them off! For Searles knew that the henchmen of Pecos Mike Brill and Mex Larned would sooner or later strike. It might be an hour, might be a week. But it was inevitable.

Captain Shuford, back at headquarters in Sonora town, was ignorant of the true situation. A week or a month later—or whenever it dawned upon him that no reports had come through from across the river for some time—he would maybe send someone to investigate. And that one would find Christoval in outlaw hands—and never return to tell his story. But none of those grim thoughts were visible upon Searles' visage as he sat at the window of that two-story frame hostelry ironically called The Old Homestead, and watched the sly, quietly deceptive skein of intrigue weave and unravel itself along Christoval's main drag.

Tarco Catlan, the blocky-faced proprietor of The Old Homestead, ceased his nervous swabbing of his bar and edged around to one side of Searles, hunkering down so he couldn't be seen by the men at the combination pool-hall and barber-shop across the street.

"My Gawd, Searles!" he mumbled hoarsely. "They air cookin' up sumpin, shore as the devil's got horns. Yuh ain't got the chanct of uh fiddler in hell amongst these hairpins. Not even a chanct to ride outa town!"

The Ranger rubbed the gray stubble on his chin, thoughtfully twisting a brown paper quirly. "It does look a leetle badder from here than from up at the county seat," he said slowly. "But I reckon me'n Tobe will hang on a mite longer, anyhow. Can't never tell—"

A tattoo of pistol shots broke off the Ranger's words and shattered the evening silence abruptly. Searles left the chair and sidled away from the open window just as a group of men erupted from the pool hall doorway, shouting and cursing. Nor was he a moment too soon in his move, for a jagged hole suddenly appeared in the window screen and thudded against the rear wall of the barroom on a bee line from where he'd been seated.

Searles jerked his hat brim over one eye,

viewing the bullet's course with bleak regard. Then, with a curious crablike motion, he started for the lobby door, just as a second bullet ripped through the screen and whanged by less than a foot from the Ranger's grizzled head. Drawing the long-barreled six-shooter from its holster, he passed through the deserted lobby with that same deceptive, limping pace and reached the front door.

Tobe Odom, rawboned, red-faced and fiery-haired, bounded down the stairs to join him, his blue eyes snapping, his pistol drawn. Sergeant Clint waved him back sardonically, as, halted beside the hotel entrance, he stared across the street.

"Come here, Tobe," he chuckled, "an' git a good laff."

A lank, sandy-haired, droopy-mustached man with a star on his vest was herding a couple of seemingly drunken fellows down the street toward the local calabozo, his drawn gun prodding their cruppers. As they passed the hotel porch the two Rangers watched with knowing grins, thumbs thrust in their cartridge belts. The man with the star glanced toward them, scowling darkly, as his charges stumbled and weaved and swore obscenely.

"Walkin' these jaspers to the lock-up," he volunteered harshly. "Shootin' up the barber-shop, they was—full uh Paso Kate's likker. New pilgrims in Christoval is apt to make the mistake they ain't no law here."

"Do tell," grinned Searles. "Which only goes to show how deceivin' appearances c'n be, Liggett."

The town marshal gave them a venomous look, then kept on, cursing under his breath. He knew that neither Searles nor Odom was taken in by the late gun-play which had been especially staged in the expectation of knocking off the sergeant "accidentally." Stray shots—deftly aimed!—had a habit of hitting innocent bystanders. And as soon as it got dark the marshal would release the two men, if he locked them up at all. And the only result of the scheme had been damage to Tarco Catlan's barroom screen and wall.

"Give us a drink," Searles told the jittery proprietor. "We ain't eatin' sand for supper—yet."

The glass halfway to his mouth, he paused, peering squint-eyed up the main

street. In the red light of the sinking sun a horseman was riding into Christoval—a horseman little more than a kid, with scabbard rifle on his saddle and six-shooter buckled around his waist. Straight along the main street toward the livery stable and corral at its far end he rode, his wiry dun cow pony at a walk, he erect in the hull, right hand resting lightly on his hip.

Searles downed his drink, rolled a cigarette.

"Another shorthorn enterin' the corral for ropin' and brandin'," he commented drily. "Drink up, Tobe."

AND as Bart Livermore rode along main street there was that ineffable tang of trouble in the air that quickened his senses, made his eyes watch everything in sight and his ears listen to each least sound that broke the unnatural quiet. He rode slowly and very, very warily, every sense at feather edge.

The denizens on the street, those in store and saloon, watched him with speculative eyes, their faces impassive, uninviting, unfriendly. The citizens of Christoval did not welcome or trust strangers, or encourage their remaining in their midst. And as Bart Livermore's gaze took in the score of buildings comprising the town, false front and adobe, sun-warped and unpainted, flanking both sides of the rutted, sandy street—when he saw the furtive, cold-eyed, hard-faced inhabitants who watched him so narrowly, his own hatchet-face grew bleak as a Texas norther. The boys back at Sonora certainly hadn't lied about this settlement.

He turned into the livery barn, and a man standing near the front of a Mexican chili joint watched him disappear. He smiled crookedly and a faint smile crossed his wolfish face as he turned abruptly and walked up the street toward the Hell's Bells saloon and dance hall, headquarters of Pecos Mike Brill and his lieutenant, Mex Larned.

Little took place in Christoval that did not sooner or later come to the ears of the big boss. And tonight, as on most occasions, it would be sooner than later. That pilgrim was riding a livery stable horse which Scar Dudley had forked out of town that afternoon. Which was news

richly deserving Pecos Mike's immediate attention.

Bart let the dun drink at the water trough, then rode into the stable's runway and dismounted. A hostler with bulbous, beet-red nose and bloodshot eyes advanced from the tack room.

"Grain him," said Bart, "then turn him loose in the c'ral."

The hostler showed black teeth in a snarl. "Whaddaya doin' with that stable jughead?" he demanded. "How come?"

"You air askin' a question, friend, that does its own answerin'," Bart drawled. "I been sittin' him."

"Yeh? Where'd yuh git that hoss, stranger?"

"Inherited him up the road a ways."

The hostler's face darkened, but he said nothing else aloud as he led the dun rearward. Bart, hanging up his saddle and bridle, shouldered his war-bag and Winchester, and strode with his awkward gait down the main street toward The Old Homestead, the only two-storied building in town.

Behind him, a second man who had been loafing in the tack-room hurriedly quitted the stable and went toward the Hell's Bells, to report to Pecos Bill that this maverick pilgrim not only rode Scar Dudley's cayuse but was acting like a Bitter Creeker in the bargain.

SERGEANT CLINT SEARLES, seated with Odom at a table in the barroom eating a mess of ham and eggs, looked up as Bart Livermore entered the hostelry and inquired of Tarco Catlan where he could find the Ranger. And when the youth walked over to their table the grizzled officer quickly sized him up from the crown of his weather-stained hat to the toes of his scuffed boots.

"Well, son," he said amiably, "yuh lookin' for me? I'm Searles."

"My name's Bart Livermore," said the newcomer, in a soft drawl. "From headquarters at Sonora, suh. With a letter from Cap'n Shuford for you, suh."

Searles grunted, and the tan envelope given Bart many hours before changed hands. The sergeant put on his spectacles, and read the message slowly; then raised his eyes and stared intently at Livermore with a peculiar, probing look. An explo-

sive grunt erupted from his lips as he said suddenly, "Sit down, son. Tarco's spig can cook ham an' aigs good as any Chinaman, an' I reckon you're plumb hungry. While yuh eat you c'n tell me all about it. And—oh, yeah. This red-headed pardner of mine is known as Tobe Odom."

The hard-bitten oldtimer, picking his teeth with a sharpened goose-quill, watched Bart Livermore's tanned, hatched face as the youngster ate a hearty meal and between bites recounted recent happenings. Watched his curious bluish-gray eyes, sharp as a cactus spike, and the lantern jaw; listened to that soft, drawling voice as it recounted the wild tales told him of Christoval, and of the important mission entrusted him by Cap'n Shuford. Bart finished by telling of the unexpected attempt to drygulch him that late afternoon en route, and of riding the busher's horse to town.

Sergeant Searles stroked his stubby, sun-bleached mustache and snorted—once. "Shuford!" he muttered under his breath. "Damned young whipper-snapper wearin' Ranger uniform! I'm gonna let him know, sometime maybe, just what I think of his damned kangaroo-court order. Hell an' hominy!" But aloud he said to Livermore: "Son, yuh blew in here at the worst minut yuh could of. Me'n Tobe here are sittin' on a powder keg which is liable to blow up any tick uh a watch. Hell's due to spout fire at both ends an' buckle all outa shape in the middle."

Bart's eyes glinted. "I was afeerd I'd git heah at the tail end o' trouble, suh—that's the reason I shoved ahead so peert like."

"Tail end?" snorted Searles. "Hell, younker, this is only the beginnin'. We're buckin' a pat hand here in Christoval, ag'in a stacked an' marked deck. When the boys tole you they was a bounty on Ranger scalps in this neck uh hell they didn't state far wrong, kid. Brill an' Larned have got this dump of the devil sewed up tighter'n Dick's hat-band, an' blue sky's the limit. Christoval's always been tough, but it's skunk rotten now—"

He broke off as a party of men entered the barroom from the hotel lobby. The town marshal, Hogg Liggett, was in the lead. Lank, horse-faced, he glanced around the room and then made straight for the

table where the three Rangers sat, his half-dozen coterie of tough looking specimens following watchfully. Nodding shortly to Searles, the town marshal fixed Bart Livermore with a bleak and narrowed eye.

"Young feller," he said raspily, "you're under arrest. My prisoner, savvy? Charges include murder an' robbery, as well as hoss theft. Git up."

Bart Livermore's eyes had suddenly become tinged with red. He made no motion to obey the officer's command. As Liggett's hand crept toward his gun-belt, old "Sidewinder" Searles spoke, and his voice was like the crack of a bullwhip. "Easy, marshal," he snapped. "Plumb easy-like. You ain't takin' this younker to yore chicken-wire hogan—not any yuh ain't. Not for coolin' airy stinkin', drygulchin' spawn uh hell that tried to bush him a while ago in uh arroyo. Mix that with yore Bull Durham, Liggett."

"What—whaddaya mean?" blustered the marshal.

"You savvy what I mean, you hoss-faced bullbat! This younker happens to be a State Ranger, mister, an' I'm answerin' for him *personally*."

"But the danged young squirt kilt Scar Dudley an' stole his cayuse—"

"Scar Dudley, eh? One uh Mex Larned's pilot-fish." Searles' face was flint hard. Unhurriedly he drew his old bone-handled .45 and tapped slowly, deliberately with it on the table.

"Marshal," he drawled, "I'm all bluff. Yuh don't have to mind me or this gun. But damn yore ugly soul," he suddenly rasped, "I'd advise you to git to hell out uh here! Start steppin'!"

The three Rangers were like coiled springs, waiting for Liggett's play. But there was none. The red-faced marshal and his henchmen left rather hurriedly and without more talk, but with many a black look toward the trio. And as the party clumped outside, one of them snarled: "You'll sing another tune outa the other side of yore mouth *muy pronto*, you limp-in' lobo!"

Searles grinned wryly and reholstered his gun. "Yuh begin to see how the wind blows, son?" he asked sardonically. "They don't aim for *you* to ride outa Christoval alive—now. They've put the tag on yuh."

Bart Livermore nodded slowly. Above his hard, sharp jaw his mouth was narrowed to a knife-edged line. "I think, suh," he said quietly, "that I'll kinda look ovah this town a spell, tonight."

The veteran sergeant scowled and shook his grizzled head. "Nope, yuh won't," he said with blunt finality. "This ain't no time to poke around an' wade into trouble up to yore belly-band. They's *paisanos* out there who would put a knife or bullet where yore suspenders cross quicker'n yuh could say Jack Robinson. Nosiree, son. You rate a night's sleep, an' such you're goin' to git. Better pound yore ear while you're able."

HE led the way upstairs to a long hall, where doors flanked it on each side. Stopped, and pushed open a door. "Yore room, kid," Searles said. "Better keep the screen locked, as well as the door. Can't tell jest which way the cat's gonna jump, but jump it will, sooner or later. 'Noches."

It was a small room, bare walled and wooden floored, with a single window overlooking an alleyway between the hotel and general store, an easy drop to the ground. There was a rickety washstand and water pitcher, an iron cot with blankets, and a wooden hat-tree crowned with stag antlers. For a long time Bart Livermore sat in the darkness beside the window, chewing tobacco thoughtfully, gazing out and listening to all the loose-lawed hilarity of that cold-deck town. An endless jangling of shouts, discordant music and ribaldry—

After a while he shucked off his boots, draped his Stetson on the wooden clothes tree above his coat, and struck a match to the smoky kerosene lamp on the table. He wanted light to breach his tarp roll and war-bag, and to clean and oil his gun. Stooping over to lift the roll on the bunk, his shoulder touched the clothes tree and rocked it, moving his hat and coat.

And at that exact second several things happened simultaneously.

Came a rippy tear at the screen, a dull thud, and the wooden tree swayed and danced like a sapling in a sandstorm. The loud, flat smash of a high-powered rifle blended with that queer antic, shattering the near stillness. And even as Bart snatched his six-shooter and flattened himself against the wall a second shot cracked from the alley. The teetering tree toppled

to the floor, spilling hat and coat. Came the faint sound of running feet—then silence.

Moving like a panther, Bart blew out the lamp and sprang to the window, looking out. But the alley seemed deserted, with no sign of life. The hombre who had shot from the dark with a high-powered rifle had vamoosed, evidently thinking his slugs had found their mark when the tree holding the hat and coat was knocked over. A gulching hombre who had seen the moving shadow of the jostled tree, and thought it Bart. As the Kentuckian lit a match and surveyed the fallen stand, his jaw tightened. Two slugs were imbedded in the wooden tree, and both had gone through his coat.

Came a hammering upon the hall door, and the Sidewinder's grim voice calling: "Bart? Son—are yuh all right? Open up."

Bart opened and said he was all right. And when he told the sergeant and Odom what had happened, Searles took the boy's arm and piloted him out into the hall and down to his own room. And his harsh voice contained a peculiar quality, a tense-ness, that made Odom look at his noncom sharply.

"Listen, son," he said. "They're after yore scalp, good an' plenty. Damn that snooty-nosed, stuck-up tin-soldier Shuford, with his political pull, who sent you here! The damn, blind fool! If he's a Texas Ranger then I'm a stinkin' carpet-bag Republican! You seen what's happened here tonight, kid. Bounty's on our scalps. This Christoval gang's jest been waitin', with black murder in their dirty hearts, for a chance to sand us out. They hate the Rangers an' all that we stand for. Now—their time has come, an' they know it. If they c'n git shet of me'n Tobe, anarchy will reign in the Trans-Pecos, with no more law than's in the devil's sulphur pit. Sabe?"

He gripped Bart's shoulder with a lean, gnarled hand, looking straight into blue-gray eyes that returned his scrutiny unblinkingly. Then his sun-seamed face wrinkled in a half-grin as he groped in his pocket and took out a sheet of tan paper.

"Son, this is the message you brought from Captain Shuford," he said quietly.

Bart Livermore took the paper, read it slowly, laboriously. His hatchet face darkened, then grew stony hard and set. The missive read:

Sergeant, I'm sending this damn' fool young hillbilly to you for a working over. He is always spouting off about adventure, glory and the like, and chafing at the bit because garrison life is too tame. He needs the "cure" to tone him down, so we've decided to send him along to you for a whole bellyful of thrilling hair-raisers. You know how to manage it, of course; a revolt, plenty of gunplay, etc., faked by some of your hardboiled pals down in Christoval. When you have made a Christian out of the young gun-toter, send him back for the verdict of Company E's "Kangaroo Court."

CAPTAIN WARREN SHUFORD,
Commanding.

He passed the paper back, and his voice was brittle and hard. "So that is the game, suh? I was afeerd of a catch in this, some'res—Cap'n Shuford an some uh the boys don't 'pear to like me overmuch. Well, suh?"

"Well, hell!" snapped Searles. "Shuford's crazier'n a dang bullbat, that's what. Got no more idee uh conditions over here than they got up in Austin, where likely they'll post us up as blasted heroes an' a lot of other tripe when the smoke's cleared away—only we won't know it. That, nor nothin' else."

"Then—then—" began the puzzled youth. "That hombre I kilt didn't nick my year an' down my hoss, an' that feller shoot inter the room tonight—jest playful like? Yuh mean the Cap'n ain't writ yuh before to plan this—yuh mean it's *true*—?"

Searles was watching him with narrowed eyes. "I mean it's so true, son," he said slowly, "that I'm going to send you back to Sonora before daylight. To Company E, for reinforcements. If yuh fail, me'n Tobe here are gone goslin's. Even if yuh don't make it hell for leather, yuh c'n bring back a couple uh markers for Christoval's Boot Hill. Mine an' Tobe's."

Bart Livermore looked at the old sergeant, his mouth twisted queerly. He gripped Searles' hand. "I'll cut her, suh," he said. "Git through in spite uh the whole danged town."

The old Ranger nodded. As Bart turned to go, Searles touched his arm again, and handed him the tan sheet of paper.

"Jest tear this up, son," he said. "It ain't worth savin'."

BART LIVERMORE slipped noiselessly from the kitchen door of The Old Homestead, into the inky darkness of pre-dawn. A light pack was slung across his shoulders; he carried rifle and pistol and boots. On his feet were deerhide moccasins. Jaw set like a clamp, he hugged the shadows and weaved his way toward the livery stable, every line of his body and face bent on grim purpose. He was the essence of deadliness, chill and inexorable. Old Searles had seen him off with a hand-clasp more expressive than any words.

From some of the saloons and honkatonks music and voices still sounded, but at the hour most of Christoval was asleep. He reached the stable without discovery, but as he turned into the dark runway a rising shadow met him.

"Whaddaya want?" The shadow's voice was gruff, surly.

Bart's answer was swift—a cutting smash with the Bisley's barrel that dropped the man with no more than a choky gasp. Strident snores from the tack room advertised the presence of a second party, and softly opening the door, the youth tiptoed over to a cot and administered another lusty whack across the tousled head of the bulbous-nosed Quag Kimbro, proprietor.

It was but the work of a moment to securely hogtie and gag both men and shut them in the tack room. Lighting a lantern, Bart narrowly inspected the horses in the stable stalls, quickly selecting a couple of wiry, sturdy-looking mounts, a dun and sorrel, and putting his own blanket and saddle upon the latter. He was in the saddle and swinging through the rear doorway inside of ten minutes after his arrival.

Cool and taut, he rode across the baked corral area and out of the darkened town into the 'squite, leaving the drunken shouts and jangle of tinny music behind him. Ahead lay open country, to the west the jagged silhouette of the San Juan hills. Overhead the black velvet of the sky was set with diamond points of starlight. And Bart Livermore, stiffly pushing his commandeered pony, galloped away toward the Pecos, with the paling moon for a beacon.

Searles' last words kept dinning in his ears to the thud of those flying hoofs.

"Remember, son—*git there*. An'—come back!"

It was ten o'clock that night when Bart Livermore rode into Sonora and wearily threw himself from an exhausted pony. His face was grimed with alkali dust, his eyes bloodshot and haggard, but he wasted scant time in locating the whereabouts of Captain Warren Shuford, who was attending a dance in town.

The dapper officer, called from his partner, was frowning annoyedly when he confronted the disheveled youth. "What the devil are you doing back here?" he snapped.

"Listen, suh," Bart blurted out hurriedly. "There's trouble a-simmerin' in Christoval—jest ready to blow the lid uh hell plumb off—an' Sergeant Searles sent me back heah—"

Shuford burst into a roar of laughter. "Sent you back for the whole company, I suppose! Uprising, bloody murder, etc., with all the trimmings, eh? Gad, this is rich! I guess Searles and his pardner are about to get their throats cut, are they? And the whole town has gone rabies, eh?"

"Cap'n, I tell you, suh," Bart countered hoarsely, "that they *is* bad trouble down yander. Sergeant Searles an' Odom want help. The sergeant said to come a-hellin' quick as the Lord'll let yuh, or else—"

Once again Shuford's laugh of mockery shut him off. "That will be all, Livermore," he chuckled. "Get back to your quarters. I'll hear the rest of your blood-and-thunder yarn in the morning, some time. Seales sure is one quick worker!"

And he hurried back inside, still grinning, leaving Bart standing at the steps, his knobby hands clenched in impotent fury, his face working. Shuford had taken his words as part of the "cure"—ridiculed and laughed at him—secure and safe in Sonora and civilization. Damn him to hell! Down there in Christoval, at that very minute, Searles and Odom were facing death, waiting—waiting. . . .

With a choky curse, Bart Livermore wheeled and started running toward the Ranger barracks and coral, tears of impotent fury stinging his eyes. Snubbing two fresh mounts, so he could ride in relays like he did coming, he forced the locked door of the supply-room and disappeared into its dark interior. In no

time he was out again, with a couple of sawed-off full-choke Greener shotguns and a sackful of buckshot-loaded shells. And in a glazed leather pouch he carried five sticks of dynamite, with their fuses.

Sergeant Monte Clark of Company E watched him saddle up and ride out of town like the devil was in tow. Bound for Christoval, seventy miles away across the Pecos. Like the rest of the Sonora Rangers, he was wise to the kangaroo court and the Kentuckian's "cure," but he was also a border veteran and wise to the Southwest's ways. Monte Clark's eyes were narrowed very thoughtfully as he abruptly wheeled about and went looking for First-Sergeant Nate Patton.

DOWN in Christoval, old Jeff Searles, Tobe Odom and Tarco Catlan kept grim watch in the barrom of The Old Homestead House. Dusk was creeping into town from the western hills, and an unnatural quiet cloaked the main street, almost as if Christoval was shrinking within itself in dread of impending calamity. The very air smacked of danger, as if it feared the slightest movement would trip the hair-trigger of tension.

There had not been the least growl of complaint to the sergeant about the pistol-whipping and horse-swiping at the livery stable, which was ominous enough of itself. All the night before, that day itself, mounted men had been riding into Christoval, armed to the teeth, going about their business with sinister purposefulness. And now, at dusk, they tramped the board sidewalks, milled in groups, poured in and out the swinging doors of the Hell's Bells.

The trio in The Old Homestead watched—and waited.

Inside the Hell's Bells, two men were deftly inciting their cohorts to violence. One was a big man, six feet and more in height, burly and broad shouldered, with square face, yellowish eyes and flattened nose. A man of tremendous strength—and lust for power. He was Pecos Mike Brill, boss of Christoval, and he assayed pure snake blood. With him was Mex Larned, his lieutenant and right bower. Swarthy of skin, inky of eye and hair, a lithe, well-built hombre, wearing fancy boots, brocaded vest and pearl-handled pistols in hand-tooled holster. A pair of the

coldest-blooded killers that ever squeezed trigger, and backed by as ornery a gang of coyotes as ever ran in a pack.

Brill was winding up his tirade.

"It's our night to howl, compadres. These damned vinegar-roon Rangers have whistled their last tune down here. That young squirt who sanded Scar got scared and hightailed after those bullets fanned his ears, and tonight we take Searles and Odom. Git Searles first—the damned old windbroke, spavined, distempered cripple! And I don't care if Tarco gits his in the shuffle, either. He's been puttin' up those John Laws an' feeding 'em."

He was master of the mob, completely. Had roused his cohorts to a fighting, blood-lust pitch, and fed the fire with rotgut liquor. And as darkness fell, the noise and furor increased tenfold. Searles, looking from the window of the lightless barrom, saw the weaving mob spew from the saloon and start down the street in a bedlam of clamor. Primed for trouble, and led by Brill and Larned themselves. Old Searles looked to his pair of six-shooters. He grinned crookedly at the grim-faced Odom and the stiff-lipped Catlan.

"We're gonna have to fight," he said evenly. "Looks like the lad is gonna need them Boot Hill markers after all. Mud in your eyes, *compañeros*."

Tarco hefted his shotgun and crouched at a window. He was casting his lot with the two doomed Rangers—all his servants, knowing what was coming, had deserted him that late afternoon. And the roar of the mob was coming closer.

Searles and Odom had slipped to the front door. Now, suddenly and unexpectedly, they swung the oak panel wide and stepped out onto the porch, spraddle-legged and with drawn guns. On their vests gleamed the gold star of the Service.

"Whoa up there a minnit, boys," called Searles coldly. "Yuh better call this a night, for you're wadin' into trouble over yore hocks if yuh come any closer."

Their sudden appearance with drawn six-shooters, their calmly aggressive attitude, those Texas stars on their chests, brought the mob up to a halt. But only for a moment. Men in their state of mind were berserk, would do anything. Just a weaving, stampeding herd of crazed brutes,

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blood-hungry from whiplash words and raving mad from rotten whiskey. Somebody bawled out an order; a roaring below of oaths followed. The men behind surged forward.

"Kill 'em!" came the chant. "Tuh hell with the law!"

A gun cracked; two more. Lint flew from Searles' vest as he staggered against the wall, and bullets thudded into the woodwork. The sergeant and Odom returned the fire as fast as three practiced hands could squeeze trigger, then ducked inside the lobby and bolted the door behind them. The roar of Tarco's scatter-gun bellowed from the barroom, answered by yells.

Searles was cursing steadily, between set teeth. A bullet had caught him high in the left shoulder, incapacitating his left arm. And the retreat inside the hotel spurred the attackers to cries of derision and triumph.

"Got 'em on the run!" came the roar.

"Bust in that door! Let 'em have it!"

Window glass tinkled and shattered as a hail of bullets spewed into lobby and bar, showering the rooms with splinters and ricocheting crazily. The three defenders, sheltered behind the desk counter, holding their fire, heard the battering-ram hit the door a terrific thud. Timbers groaned under the impact. The Rangers drummed a salvo through the portal, but despite curses and groans of hit men the heavy ram kept up its hammering.

Tarco knocked a man out of a barroom window with a roaring blast, but a moment later a ball of kerosene-soaked rags looped through the bar window, followed by three more. They spouted flame—filled the hotel's interior with light.

Firing, cursing, the three trapped men retreated to the stairs and turned at bay. Smoke filled the lower floor as tongues of flame licked upward. The sun-baked hotel would burn like tinder. The ram still banged against the front door, and a plank splintered. Through the narrow opening Searles and Odom and Tarco could see and hear the milling men plainer as their guns hurled vicious lead through every aperture.

"Reckon we'd as well shag out, hombres," said the sergeant. "There ain't no

use waitin' longer. She looks like a quick, hot blaze."

"You're right," growled Odom, wiping blood from his face. "Here's luck."

With handkerchiefs over their faces to slightly protect smarting eyes and burning throats, the three defenders started down the stairs. But before they'd negotiated the last step a blinding flash lit up the area before the hotel porch, followed by a tearing explosion that made The Old Homestead shiver in every aged timber.

BART LIVERMORE, reeling in his saddle, plying quirt and spur to his sweat and foam lathered horse, tore through the mesquite fringe and into Christoval's backyard, his eyes red cored as a jaguar's at night and his teeth bared in a wolfish snarl. He could see the crimson splash of light playing about the hotel; could hear the rolling tattoo of gunfire, the strident and triumphant howls of the mob.

"God on the mountain!" his breath sobbed through dust-caked lips.

Tumbling from his played-out pony in the alley behind the line of buildings across from the hotel, he ran at a staggering gait toward the rear of the saddle-and-boot shop, a low 'dobe shack next to the pool hall. The shotguns, his rifle and pistol, the sack of cartridges and the dynamite were all grasped in his arms.

A shadowy figure carrying a short ladder appeared behind a store, cried out and snatched for a holstered pistol. Bart shot him in the belly, cracked his skull with the Bisley barrel, jerked up the ladder and placed it against an adobe wall. A minute later he was on the roof, the ladder pulled up behind him, and crouching back of the adobe parapet.

Panting between clenched teeth, he fused and lighted the first stick of dynamite, his eyes fixed upon the maddened men scrambled before the burning hotel. It was the stick's explosion, bursting in their very midst, that almost knocked Searles and Odom and Tarco off their feet.

Before the dazed attackers realized what was happening a second stick arched into their midst and went off with a red fan of light, knocking men over like ninepins. While hard on its heels came the bellowing reports of shotguns, spraying death in the shape of lead buckshot into the para-

lyzed men below. In the space of half a minute the street resembled a shambles. And then the uproar of firing and yelling became a tornado of wrath as the renegades discovered Bart's covert.

Bullets sang about him like hornets; shadowy figures darted through the smoke. Hurling bullets and dynamite, Bart wheeled as on a pivot, dealing death to those wavering outlines, sending them sprawling as they met his unerring greetings. But a dozen swearing, snarling madmen were scaling the roofs of adjacent buildings. It would be only a matter of time before he'd glimpse their rage-distorted faces and flaming eyes. But he had temporarily broken the attack, anyhow. And he didn't aim to stay on that roof and be trapped like a rabbit by a hound pack.

At a crouch he weaved toward the alley edge of the parapet, and staggered to his knees as something that felt like a hard yet oozy hunk of ice plowed along his ribs and sent his vision wavering. But he only snarled savagely, and throwing his knobby knees over the edge, jumped. He fell flat and rolled as he hit the hardpan, but snapped to his knees and blazed two shots from his pistol at figures in the alley mouth. One tumbled; the other staggered out of sight with a cry.

Bart Livermore started walking forward stiffly, pistol thrust ahead of him, every instinct and sense aroused to murder pitch. About him all was a swimming, swirling maze of powder and wood smoke, shouts and hoarse curses, grunts, confusion. A section of his hat brim dangled in a ragged, bullet-slashed strip—his shirt was a wet gory rag. But still he came on.

Mex Larned, his swarthy face ghastly with rage and defeat, saw him and threw down a rattler-quick gun. But quick as he was, death was already flaming into the groove as he got his Colt to rolling. Larned shuddered, bent and buckled, arms hooked across his perforated belly, as he pitched downward.

But the world was cut away beneath Bart Livermore's feet in a blinding flash

of fire that seared his eyeballs. His last coherent memory was of frenzied shouts and an inferno of sound that trembled the very earth east of the blazing hotel.

Firing as they came, Company E rode hell-for-leather into Christoval, led by Sergeants Monte Clark and Nate Patton. In less time than it takes to tell they were in full possession of the town, with very few prisoners under herd. And old Clint Searles was bending over Bart Livermore, forcing raw whiskey between his lips, while Clark bathed a scalp wound in his carrot hair and inspected a ragged gouge along his ribs. Bart came to, blinking, coughing, trying to sit up.

"Take her easy, yuh danged wildcat!" said. Searles. "You been blooded plenty, son. And've done plenty. Got Mex Larned—an' Pecos Brill deader'n Moses over yonder. But for you, the boys woulda come just a leetle too late. Monte 'n Nate been tellin' me how they followed yuh, killin' their hosses. Tole me what you done, too. Cum back by yoreself, because Shuford wouldn't lissen to you—damn the swivel-chair, stuck-up shorthorn! Ranger—hell! I've got plenty to say to that so-and-so when we go back to Sonora—plenty to spout up in Austin to the adjutant-general, too." He finished in a snarl.

Bart Livermore spat out his cud of tobacco, wiping a grimy hand across his haggard face. "I—I didn't hafta tote back no tombstones, nohow," he grinned thickly. "An'—kin I join up with yore company, sergeant? I'd kinda like . . ."

Pain drove vision from him again, but as if from a distance he heard old Searles say in a voice gruff with emotion: "I'll tell the danged West yuh c'n join, son. You've done joined now. You filled a straight at both ends and in the middle this night—stacked up man-size in a man's country."

"And," added the Sidewinder, with a hard grin, "not to speak of boomeranging Shuford's kangaroo-court into somethin' he won't fergit to his dyin' day, by Godfrey damn!"





Latimer stepped back, rolling a cigarette — and a sniper's gun roared from between the buildings.

LEAD LAW FOR THE BIG 4

By Meredith Davis

Steve Latimer never ducked trouble—but the Gila gamble could bring only one pay-off. For the Four of Diamonds from the Blantons was the sign of bushwhack death.

STEVE LATIMER had been in Gila Gulch less than forty-eight hours when he got the four of diamonds that brought things to a climax. He wasn't playing poker at the time, either. It was too early in the day for that—hardly nine o'clock in the morning, in fact, when he came down from his room in the Gila House, this Border town's one hotel, and found the four of diamonds waiting for him. . . .

Steve came to Gila Gulch looking for trouble. It was the one spot in the state where he knew that trouble would meet him half way—or better. For Gila had a sort of reputation.

It was a cowtown that ate its meat raw and drank its liquor straight. It made its own laws and damned all others; and sometimes, just for the fun of it, it damned its own! Strangers were tolerated, but only long enough to spend their money or prove up on their toughness. Failing in the latter test, they were either given a chance to beat a flock of .45 slugs out of town or else were installed as permanent residents, with Boot Hill as their address.

Now and then, of course, a stranger made the grade and gained the right to survival, a survival, however, that was subject to change without notice. That is, unless you could call a four of diamonds proper notice.

Steve Latimer had heard something of the sinister legend of these four-spot cards that were handed to unwelcome visitors in Gila Gulch. That was one of the reasons he had come here, and it was the chief reason he knew his search for trouble would be short and easy.

Stories had sifted through the South-

west, the last year or so, of a custom, here in Gila Gulch, that wore almost the aspect of a local legend. And the men who had given birth to this custom were the men who had done most to make Gila the hell-hole it was.

Four men, they were, like the pits on the four of diamonds. And red in coloring they were, too, like the marks on the cards—perhaps not so clean, so honest a red, yet ruddy enough in skin and brick-hued enough in the hair of their heads to win and deserve the name of The Big Red Four!

And they *were* big, six feet or more, each of them; bulky of body, iron of arm, flint-hard of nature. They had to be, to hold their sway in this Border town which no man, no gang, no law, had so far broken.

It was sometimes a matter for bar-room debate as to which of these Big Red Four czars of Gila was the fastest with his gun. But there was never any argument about The Big Red Four's superiority, singly or collectively, over all-comers.

Blanton was their name—brothers, ranging in ages from Nate, nearing fifty, to Ross, midway in his thirties. They had ridden into Gila Gulch three or four years ago and had battered their way, like a well-oiled juggernaut, to their varied positions of dominance in this county-seat of Cottonwood county.

Nate was the gambler-boss of Gila, his domain centering in the gambling-rooms of the Lobo Loco saloon which, in turn, was run by Dudley, second of these brothers. Ross, youngest in years but not the least in his brand of gunmanship, was sheriff of the county.

AND then there was Jasper Blanton, next youngest of the unholy quartet, a man around whom clung most of the wild tales of daredeviltry, of outlawry, that had gone on apace in Cottonwood county these last three years or so. Jasper seldom came in to Gila Gulch; he roamed afield and no one, except his brothers, knew just where his home was. Rumor placed it in this or that mountain or foothill or in some shack or ranchhouse, perhaps, hidden in the depths of an impenetrable valley.

But only his brothers knew, and only his brothers ever saw him in his lair—unless, now and then, some hired gunmen, half-breeds mostly, who trickled across the Border at Jasper's bidding, then returned when their lawless jobs were done.

Gila Gulch never asked questions of the Blantons. It followed their lead and, if a few of the hardier spirits among the town's populace did manage to stand out against the Blantons, it was only because they kept to a course of passive neutrality. This meager minority knew enough to let well enough alone; if they minded their own business and let the Blantons run things, they could avoid trouble; if they tried physical resistance, open combat, they knew—but they never did; it would have meant suicide; wholesale and sudden!

AND this was the combine which Steve Latimer had come here to buck! Well, now that he had received the four of diamonds, he knew just where he stood. He'd been expecting some such move by the Blantons, ever since he had alighted from his cowpony in front of the sheriff's office day before yesterday and walked inside to ask Ross Blanton to hand over his badge.

Ross, not averse to a little joking of his own on occasion, when it could be given a brutal or sardonic turn, grinned up at the stranger from his seat at the table.

"Help yoreself, mister—and then mosey over and pick up the keys to the State Bank, 'crost the street yonder! What's the game, anyways?"

Steve had grinned back, too—grinned at the indifference Sheriff Blanton was

showing instead of the expected fight. But maybe he'd prod him a little harder.

"The game is," Steve had told him in slow, icy tones, "that I'm takin' over yore office—and runnin' things in this county! Savvy now?"

Ross Blanton made a gesture of his right arm, but Steve's .45 swung its nose upward, pointing through the open bottom of his holster so that the sheriff, if he hadn't been staring into Steve's face, could have peered down the Colt's muzzle almost to its back teeth.

"I'll—" he began.

But Ross knew the gun was trained on him; and he knew it had six back teeth of lead, without his looking. Quick as he was on peeling his hardware, he wasn't fool enough to try to draw when a man had him covered from the holster.

"Must be a Texican," he snarled. "Damn' cheap Texas draw! All right, yuh got me where yuh can do the talkin', so whistle yore tune. Afterward, mebbeso—"

"Yeah, mebbeso," Steve agreed bluntly. "Keep yore hands on the top o' that table!" As the sheriff obeyed, Steve stepped briskly behind him, flicked out the two guns at Blanton's hips, plucked a hideout .38 automatic from a shoulder holster beneath his vest, then stuck all three weapons in his belt and shirt-front.

"Now, while yuh're takin' it easy, I'll help myself to yore badge, like yuh said!" Steve's tones took on a more bantering air, now that the first crisis had been passed safely. He unpinned the dull silver shield from Ross Blanton's vest lapel and stuck it on his own, all this time using his left hand. He still kept his right upon the gun-butt at his side. No trusting to luck, with these Blantons, he argued.

"Damn' yore hide!" Blanton roared, springing from his chair. "What the hell yuh mean comin' in here holdin' up the sheriff? The boys'll run yuh up at the noose-end of a rope for this!"

"That's one of the risks I'm takin'," Steve drawled. "And this'll give yuh a idea o' some o' the risks you and the boys'll be takin' if they start anything. Read it!"

STEVE reached in his inside pocket and drew forth a legal-looking document; but he wouldn't let Ross Blanton take it. Instead, he flipped it open and held it before the ex-sheriff's eyes.

"Read it," he snapped.

He watched the changing expressions pass over Ross Blanton's red-mottled face. First, dull curiosity mingled with anger spread upon his countenance; then, frowning interest, a curling of the lips; and this, in turn, shifted suddenly into open rage, a burst of profanity, as the full import of the official paper struck home to him.

"I be damned if I hand over my office to *you*, governor or no governor!" he stormed. "And what's more, stranger—Latimer, I guess, from this paper!—what's more, takin' my badge this way ain't *makin'* you sheriff by a damn sight! The governor's just plain loco if he thinks—"

"Let me worry about my *bein'* sheriff, from now on, Blanton. Point is, I *am* sheriff—and yuh're my first prisoner!"

If Ross Blanton had vented his wrath before, he now became a raging tornado of abuse and mouthing defiance. Steve stood by, out of reach of a possible fistic attack by the burly giant, and let him run his temper out. But he still rested his right hand on the gun-butt, with the muzzle raised slightly.

At last Blanton paused for breath, his face purple, his chest heaving for new breath to go on. He had been too cautious, even in all his fury, to take issue with that .45 held so significantly beneath Latimer's hand. And now Steve, ignoring the threats and the maledictions that Blanton had been heaping upon him these few minutes, stepped two paces to the right, pulled a pair of handcuffs from a nail on the wall, and advanced toward Blanton.

"Nope, I ain't puttin' these irons on you, Blanton," he said. "Just takin' 'em for—future use. Got any others hereabouts?"

Blanton refused to answer. Then: "What the hell's the charge against me, anyways? You can't get away with this prisoner stuff!"

"Charge is—just plain law-breakin'. I ain't got time for details right now, but

you can hear 'em all when the grand jury meets."

Blanton laughed a snarling laugh. "Grand jury, hell! This county ain't had a grand jury in three years!"

Steve smiled icily: "That's *one o'* the charges you—and some others—will hear more 'bout later on. Let's mosey; I got some other visits to make today!"

His gun raised again until it was level, trained on Blanton's stomach. Steve's left arm gestured toward the half-open door that he had seen led to the jail behind the sheriff's office. "Wait," he said. "Where's yore keys?"

"Aw, find 'em yore—" Blanton growled.

"*Get yore keys, Blanton—pronto!*"

This time Steve's gun came out, flashing its nose to within an inch of Blanton's chest. Blanton got the keys.

A minute later the erstwhile sheriff of Cottonwood was behind the bars of the jail he had ruled for three years or more. There were no other prisoners, which Steve had ascertained in advance of his entrance, just as he had learned when Ross Blanton would be alone in his office that day. He had timed his arrival just right, even if he had had to do considerable scouting around the town earlier in the morning. . . .

And now, as Steve fingered this four of diamonds that he had found on his key-rack nail this second morning after he had come to Gila Gulch, he knew that his job was really warming up. So far, it had been too easy—what with the shearing of Ross Blanton's authority and his arrest, and with the other visits he had made that first morning in town, as he had carried his two six-guns in his hands and wore his sheriff's badge openly.

HIS second visit that morning had been at the saloon officially known as the Lobo Loco, but more generally termed by its American equivalent: The Crazy Wolf.

This time, Steve had gone to see another of the Blanton brothers—Dudley, owner of the town's chief house of revelry. He rather expected more opposition, perhaps open resistance, this time, despite his wearing of the law's

badge. That case of Ross, he argued, had been *too* easy; or maybe he'd been over-lucky. Anyway, he was looking for trouble, real trouble, sooner or later—

And he got it sooner! For Dudley Blanton, standing behind his bar-rail when Steve entered, took one glance at the stranger, spotted the dully-gleaming silver badge which his brother by rights should be wearing, and he reached for the gun beneath the mahogany counter.

Even if it hadn't been for this snake-like movement by the man behind the bar, Steve would have spotted him for a Blanton by his thatch of rusty-red hair. One bartender was serving drinks to a half-dozen men at the left end of the rail; a few other men were lounging at tables, drinking eye-openers or idly playing solitaire.

None of them had seemed to notice this newcomer, who stood just within the bat-wing doors and held two guns level at his sides. It was only when those two guns barked twin salvos of flame and lead—only when Dudley Blanton's sawed-off shotgun thundered its charge into the ceiling—that the bar-flies began to buzz and scatter.

For Steve knew, this time, that he must shoot first and talk afterward, if talk were needed then. Two of his slugs made full hits; one shattered Dudley Blanton's right shoulder and made his shot-gun spatter its load wildly, and the other had landed between Dudley's eyes. The Blantons, Steve thought grimly, would have to use a *three* of diamonds now!

He gazed down at the crumpled hulk that had been Dudley Blanton. The lone bartender, hands still aloft, stood on the other side of the body, staring pop-eyed at the guns in Steve's hands. The rest of the bar-room was deserted.

"Get the coroner on the phone!" Steve rasped, gesturing with a gun. The bartender gasped a moment, his jaws moving soundlessly; then:

"Ain't no coroner!" he finally mangled.

"How come?" snapped Steve. "Mean to say Cottonwood county ain't needed a coroner, with all the killin's here?"

"Yuh—yuh—just killed the nearest

thing to a—a coroner we ever had!" the bartender blurted brokenly. His arms twitched as if tired of the strain of their upright position. Steve felt his clothing for guns, took a .38 automatic from his belt beneath his bar apron, then bade him go about his business.

"Looks like Cottonwood county's due to get a whole set o' new officers, if this keeps up!" Steve muttered. The bartender, he saw, was eying him covertly from the other end of the rail while he polished glasses and wiped the mahogany. Steve walked to his side and poked a gun in his ribs.

"Where can I find Nate Blanton this time o' day?" he bit out. He wanted no argument or subterfuges out of this bartender; he had bigger game to take his attention. And the bartender must have realized that evasion would only get him a gun-whipping, if not indeed a slug in his body.

"Nate usually don't git stirrin' 'round till noon or later," the barman answered surlily. "Mebbe yuh can catch him at the Gila House 'fore he finishes breakfast—it's 'bout noon now."

AND so Steve had departed for his third visit of the morning. But this time he found his quarry gone. Whether by accident or design he hadn't been able to tell. Perhaps, some of the barflies in the saloon when he had shot Dudley had run to Nate Blanton with the news. Perhaps Nate himself was gunning for *him!*

All right, it suited Steve fine. He kept his eyes peeled all the rest of that first day and night in town, kept them peeled for a red-haired man, a domineering type of giant, for so he had heard him described in the Borderland gossip these last few years.

It was not until midnight of that first day in town that he ran across Nate Blanton. Steve had gone to his room in the Gila House, tired with the strain, the unceasing tension and watchfulness of his search for Blanton, and had begun to undress for bed. His gun-belt and guns hung over the head post of his bed; the weapons he had taken from Ross Blanton that day were in a heap under the bed, where he had put them before

he had visited Dudley at the bar.

And now, as he was sitting on the edge of bed stripping off his high-heel boots, he heard a board creak in the hall outside his door. His right had streaked for a six-gun; on stockinged tiptoes he slipped up beside the hinged side of the door, which opened inward, so that he would be hidden behind it if some one entered.

Dead silence for a minute—two minutes, three! . . . Another creaking board, this time closer to the door. . . . Again, silence. Then, so gently that it made no sound, the knob of Steve's door was turning. He smiled briefly, remembering he had locked it with the key, which still was in the hole.

There came a faint pressure against the door when the knob had turned all the way. "Damn' fool!" Steve mused. "He might 'a' knowed I'd lock myself in!"

He reached forth quietly, quickly, gave the key a twist with his left hand, then suddenly flung the door wide.

"Come in, Blanton!" he called, and stepped to the outer edge of the door. His gun covered the towering figure of the red-haired man in the hall.

So unexpectedly had Steve acted that he had taken Blanton off-guard—for his guess that it was Blanton, he saw now, proved correct. He recognized him from many descriptions. Nate Blanton stood, arms slowly raising, and stared open-mouthed at the lithe, half-crouching figure of this newcomer to Gila Gulch.

"Come in, I said!" Steve repeated. "But come in *backward!*"

For an instant Nate Blanton seemed to debate his chances for gun-play; but he must have thought it a good time for discretion, for, with a glitter in his eye for Steve's yawning six-gun, he slowly turned and backed through the doorway. Steve's left hand deftly disarmed him—even to the habitual third gun in the shoulder hideout.

"Sit down—in that chair by the door!" Steve, as he watched the red giant comply, closed the door and turned the key, then stuck the key in the pocket of his shirt. He was mildly puzzled at Blanton's silence under the circumstances. Not like Ross, he thought, who

had laid his tongue to every cuss-word in the Border's dictionary and invented a few as he went along. No, nor like Dudley, either, whose recklessness in the face of two drawn guns had cost him his life. This fellow, Steve remembered now, was a gambler—a man steeled to mask his feelings, his very thoughts; a man who figured out his plays before he made them; in short, a man to watch like a hawk!

"Speak yore mind, Blanton!" Steve commanded, seated now on the edge of his bed. His bootless toes reached backward on the floor, to shove the guns he had taken from Ross out of any possibility of a quick lunge by this cold, calculating Nate who sat before him.

THE sorrel-thatched giant tipped back his Stetson. He lifted a cigar from a vest pocket, offered it to Steve; then, at Steve's gesture of refusal, he lighted it himself.

"I'd like to hear what's on *yore* mind, first!" Blanton suavely replied when the cigar was glowing briskly. "From the way yuh been bustin' this town wide open today, seems like it's *yore* turn to do some explainin'."

"Fair enough," agreed Steve. "But after you tell me why I'm honored with this here midnight visit in my room, when I been huntin' yuh ever since noon." He smiled tauntingly at the red giant. "Wasn't hidin' out, after yuh heard what happened to Ross and Dudley?"

"Hidin', hell!" It was the first show of emotion Steve had been able to arouse in the burly visitor. Blanton's lips curled in a derisive smile: "I was just sort o' arrangin' matters for yore funeral, that's all. Took a little time, but she's all set now." He flicked the ashes on the floor and stuck the cigar back in his mouth-corner at a jaunty angle.

Steve could not repress a sensation of admiration for this outlaw-ruler of this outlaw-town. Took nerve, he mused, to sit facing a man who had a six-gun trained on your belly—the gun that had killed your own brother a few hours before—and puff smoke in your captor's face and tell him you'd fixed up his funeral for him! Yeah, and puffing

cigar smoke as easy as if he was playing a hand of poker!

Well, Steve thought, perhaps this *was* a kind of poker game—with lives in the jackpot and lead slugs for cards! He grinned wryly at Nate.

"Mebbeso we'll make it a *double* funeral, you and me, huh?" Then, more soberly, he returned to his earlier question: "Now that yuh got here safe and sound instead o' bein' salivated through the door a coupla minutes ago, s'posin' yuh talk up a little more plain."

"Meanin' how?" Nate countered. "I got nothin' to say—right now!"

"How 'bout later—in case yuh ain't carried out o' here feet first?"

Nate blew a fresh cloud of blue smoke toward the ceiling. "All the same which way I go out o' here—*yore* funeral's set! But I might's well tell yuh I sort o' figgered on havin' yuh ready for the undertaker, by this time. Yore openin' that door that-a-way was plumb—unpolite!"

Steve gave the cool-headed gambler the tribute of a chuckle at his unexpected ending. "Yeah, reckon I should 'a' sung out who was callin' and give yuh a chanct to sneak away 'fore I could get the door open!" The smile left his lips again and Steve's eyes narrowed; this bantering wasn't getting them anywhere, better bring things to a show-down.

"All right, Blanton. We'll mosey over to the jail and yuh can join yore brother in passin' compliments about the new sheriff o' Gila. Turn yore back and put yore hands behind yuh!"

"Looks like yuh're plumb inhospitable, Latimer—if that's yore handle! Me, I was on'y figgerin' on leavin' yuh one o' my callin' cards under yore door!" And Blanton plucked a four of diamonds from a pocket; he gazed at it speculatively a moment, then held it toward Steve.

"Never mind that, Nate. I know all about them four o' diamond threats yuh brothers been dealin' out so damn' free! That's one o' the things I was sent down here by the governor to stop if I have to kill every last one o' yuh! I made a start today, but it was Dudley's fault; mebbe you and the rest don't see it that

way, though. Anyways," and Steve's lips curved grimly, "*that* card's out o' date now. Should be the *trey*-spot!"

Black rage welled up in the gambler's usually inscrutable eyes at this plain talk from the interloper. For a fractional second, Steve prepared himself for a headlong attack by this fuming giant; but the .45 jerked closer to Nate's chest, and the gambler subsided.

"Now stand up and back with yore hands!" he ordered. Nate obeyed, and a minute later Steve had him locked in a pair of the handcuffs he had brought from the sheriff's office that morning. "Now stand with yore face to the wall!"

Steve slipped his boots on, then his coat and Stetson; another moment, and his gun-belt and the extra gun were in place. And all the while he had kept one eye peeled for any overt move by Blanton.

Now, with drawn gun at Nate's back, the new sheriff of Gila took his second prisoner of the day to the Cottonwood county jail!

STEVE told himself this second morning as he descended the half dozen steps of the Gila House and mused on the four of diamonds that now rested in his pocket, it looked as if things would be warming up *poco tiempo*. Well, he could stand a little more heat; been so easy, so far, he mused, that he wondered vaguely if these Blantons hadn't been going on a bluff all the time. But, no, not unelss Boot Hill was a desert mirage, and the governor's commission that made him sheriff of Cottonwood only a scrap of paper!

It had been the governor's pet worry, this hell-hole in his otherwise fairly-lawful state. He had sent threats to the county officers at Gila, to have them ignored; he had asked the commander of the state militia his advice on sending troops down to clean out the town, and the commander had grimly shaken his head. "Wouldn't do; no call for martial law, unless there's a riot or something of the sort. And besides, I don't know whether the state guard is trained to the sort of gun-fighting that Gila Gulch practices. No; get some

damn' fool gunman who ain't afraid of hell or high water himself; and send him down there with a free hand to shoot first and ask questions afterward!"

"But if the state guard can't do it, how can one man get away with it?" the governor had asked. The commander of the state troops, himself an old law officer of the border counties, smiled knowingly.

"Get the kind o' gun shark I have in mind, and he'll know how! If I was ten years younger, I'd like a whack at it myself," he added dryly.

"Where'll I get this sort of man you're talking of?" the governor had asked, with a measure of sarcasm. "Maybe you're better acquainted that way than I am!"

The militia commander smiled at the thrust. "Yes, I sure am. And I can pick the man for you—fellow named Steve Latimer, from over Antonitos way."

"Latimer? Any relation to old Buckner Latimer, the ex-Indian fighter and Army scout?" The governor's interest had been aroused. The other nodded and said:

"Sort o'. Happens to be old Buck's son—and a hell-bending chip of the old block, give him half a chance. Tell you what to do: Send down a formal removal from office of the present sheriff, Ross Blanton; then name young Latimer sheriff *pro tem* or any damn' thing, and give him full power to act. He'll take it, anyway, but you might as well give him legal sanction for what he might do."

"That's the point—the legality of it," the governor had demurred. "Perhaps I should consult the attorney-general about it first."

"Consult him afterward if you think it's worth while," the militia commander argued. "If you let a lawyer get to messing around looking up authorities for this and that, you might as well call the deal off. You and your legal powers of the state haven't been able to clean up Gila Gulch; now let's see what a little strong-arm methods will do!"

That was how Steve Latimer, soldier of fortune, survivor of two Latin-American revolutions, ex-machine-gunner of the A. E. F., and "chip of

the old block" that had been Buckner Latimer, came to get into this Gila Gulch sheriff's job. Looked as if he was going to like it, if it didn't peter out too quick; but no, he reckoned things would hum for a while, now that he'd got this four of diamonds, and with three of The Big Red Four either in jail or dead!

Well, must be that Jasper Blanton, the mysterious one of the quartet, had taken chips in the game. All right, Steve thought; he'd see him and raise him! Then maybe his job would sort of simmer down into just everyday duties of a John Law.

AS he walked the two blocks to the sheriff's office, this second morning, he kept new watch for the fourth Blanton now—another red-head, of brawny physique, he knew. It must have been Jasper who had sent this four of diamonds some time during the night; Steve had expected action all the day before, coming on top of the arrests of Ross and Nate and the killing of Dudley Blanton. But maybe the henchmen of The Big Red Four were lost without their leaders; maybe they didn't quite savvy what it was all about, this wholesale removal of the once-invincible Blantons.

Only Jasper was left—and Jasper seldom came to town. But Steve was ready to welcome him, if he did; and he hoped he would!

Then, as he turned the corner of the second block to go down the side street to the sheriff's building and jail, he halted. A group of men stood in front of the place, laughing, gesturing, pointing to the building.

He followed their pointing hands and saw a yawning gap where the door of the sheriff's office had been. The 'dobe walls were cracked along the front of the structure, and the roof was caved in upon the floor.

It took him only a minute or two, striding into the midst of the ruins, to see that the building had been wrecked by a blast of explosive, placed under the front door so as not to harm the prisoners in the rear jail cells. And he knew, before he plunged into the still

intact jail itself, that he would find the Blantons gone.

Yes, the bars of the cells had been wrenched loose, as if by some gigantic lever. The locked doors had been pried open easily, once the bars had been forced out of place. He swore briefly, too nonplussed for the moment to give full vent to wrath. And then, as he was about to leave, he saw a square of paper pinned to the cot in the cell that had housed Nate Blanton.

There was penciled writing on it; he read it hurriedly:

Six-guns ain't in it with nitro! Try some yurself sometime if we don't get you first. We're sendin our calling card to yur hotel but this time it dont mean yure leavin town. It means yure stayin in six foot of earth. That funeral is comin off jest like I said.

There was no signature; none was needed.

Yeah, Steve reckoned, things'd soon begin to warm up! . . .

STEVE stood a moment in the ruins of the doorway facing the street, his hands gripping gun butts, his eyes searching the dozen or more men before him for the least sign of hostility. Some one exclaimed in a hoarse whisper that carried to Steve's ears.

"It's the new sheriff—the shootin' fool that got Dud Blanton yesterday!"

"Boot-hill bait!" another whispered.

He was a marked man, all right, Steve realized, even if he were not wearing the badge of office to distinguish him. His mind was feverishly turning over possible chances for him to go through with this lone game he was playing; he knew he must act quickly—knew, too, that at any moment a bullet from a Blanton hireling, or from one of the Blantons themselves, might suddenly end his brief career as sheriff of this man-eating town.

The wondering thought flashed through his mind as to the strange absence of the Blantons this morning, now that the two recent prisoners were freed and Jasper probably had joined forces with them by this time. Well, he wasn't going to wait here for them; he made too easy a target, standing in this gap-

ing wreckage of adobe and boards and shattered glass.

"Any of you gents want jobs as deputy sheriffs?" he shot out suddenly at the still staring group of townsmen. He had noticed several of them appeared to be individuals of decent countenance and law-abiding mien; some he recognized as shopkeepers or clerks he had observed in his two-day stay in town. The rest, he knew, were the usual flotsam of humanity that gathers in towns like Gila Gulch—most of them ready to do the Blantons' bidding, if only for the excitement of gunplay and seeing men killed.

There was a little murmur among the group as his question took them by surprise. Four or five of the surlier-visaged characters drifted off, furtively jeering at the lone man whose six-guns they were too wise to provoke openly. One of the remaining knot of men spoke up:

"There's plenty hombres in this man's town that'd like to—to see somethin' done about—" He hesitated to mention the dread name of Blanton; but Steve, smiling grimly, supplied the deficiency.

"All right," he snapped, "if you crave riddance o' them Blantons, I'm here to swear in any o' yuh as deputies. Step forward, gents, and raise yore right hands!"

He stepped backward from the edge of the walk casually lifted cigarette-makings from his pocket. Wind sighed from between the buildings, lifted grains of tobacco from the cigarette-paper in his hand. He grinned mirthlessly, smiling into the startled faces of the men on the walk.

He hardly expected more than one or two to respond, but he was never to know just how many of the eight or ten men would have done so, for at that precise instant his Stetson was ripped from his head by a shot that came blasting from between the buildings at his side. He ducked instinctively, and one gun blazed a single retort to the hidden sniper.

But he knew he hadn't hit him, for there was nothing to shoot at. And he saw, now that this sudden interruption

had spoiled whatever chances he might have had for enlisting even a meager staff of deputies. Well, he hadn't intended them to fight his war for him; all he was going to ask them was to stand by to take charge of the prisoners when he had rounded them up.

He called after the last of the departing townsmen:

"Say, gents! I'm deputizin' one o' yuh to take a message to the Blantons for me, if yuh ain't scared o' gettin' in sight of 'em!" He pointed to the oldest of the knot of three men: "You look old enough not to scare easy," he added. "Come here!"

The fellow eyed Steve a moment, then slowly advanced, for he had noticed that Steve's gun that had just replied to the sniper was now aiming his way.

"Got a pencil?" Steve asked him. He had remembered the four of diamonds in his shirt pocket, and the taunting note from the Blantons that he had stuck in with the card. The reluctant "deputy," whom Steve did not bother to swear in for the purpose of this errand, handed him a pencil.

Steve seated himself at what was left of the desk and chair in the sheriff's office, screened partly from snipers' bullets by the remnants of the walls. Taking out the four of diamonds now, he hastily wrote his message to the Blantons:

Nate—In half an hour I'll be returning yore call at the Crazy Wolf. Be sure and have yore brothers on hand. Yu may need them.

SHERIFF LATIMER

Then, with a grim twinkle in his eye, he penciled a heavy black cross over the red surface of one of the diamonds on the card.

"Just to keep the record straight!" he chuckled inwardly.

FIRST, Steve made a hurried visit to his room in the hotel. It was a risk, he knew, every moment he stayed in the streets, yet he had to return to the Gila House for a certain purpose. He breathed with unfeigned relief when he had gained the comparative safety of his room; but he had not failed to notice the strange quiet that seemed to have

settled upon the whole town this morning, more especially since he had called for deputies at the ruins of the jail. It was as if everybody were waiting until the storm blew over—until the show-down they knew was to break at any moment. He had made the two and a half blocks from the jail to the hotel without encountering a person, not even another sniper!

Presently he finished his brief business in his room and, with filled chambers in his twin guns, he set out for the Crazy Wolf, half a block up the street. It was just ten o'clock, but he knew the Blantons would be there—that is, if the message had been delivered. Anyway, he'd take a chance on that.

As he strode along the still deserted street his left hand felt in his shirt pocket, as if to satisfy himself of something. He quickened his pace now until he arrived at the postoffice, across the street from the Crazy Wolf. A glance at the saloon, then he turned into the little frame building that housed both the postoffice and a grocery store. He slipped into a closed telephone booth in the postoffice side of the place before any one had noticed his entrance.

Five minutes sufficed for his business with the telephone; the call had cost him thirty cents, but he knew it would be worth it! Then, arms swinging loosely at his sides, he strode across the street, darted down the side of the saloon and, a moment later, edged quietly through a rear door that led into the gambling-room behind the bar.

He paused with left hand on the door-knob, listening to the murmur of many voices. Yes, it sounded as if the clan had gathered; it wasn't quite the half hour he had set, but it wouldn't hurt to be ahead of time. So he swung the door open, took three quick steps forward and barked a command at the crowd of a score or more of men that stood in the main bar-room, most of them with their backs to him.

"Hold yore fire until yuh hear what I got to say, gents!"

His words were the first knowledge they had of his arrival. Like one man, they whirled to face the solitary figure standing midway in the gambling-room

—and, as they whirled, most of them half reached for their guns.

Blasts of flame from Steve's right-hand gun sent two men crumpling. But he saw that neither of them was a Blanton. He spied them, now, Nate, Ross and the other, who must be Jasper, standing together at the end of the bar-rail. Their hands poised above their gun-butts, but they froze at sound of Steve's gun.

"I'm not here for gun-play!" Steve announced. "I'm figgerin' on a easier way!"

His left hand streaked suddenly to his shirt pocket and he held aloft a round object, three inches long, which glistened brightly.

"I see you Blantons know somethin' about nitroglycerine!" he snapped, his eyes holding Nate's with a cold challenge. "Then yuh know that if any o' you hombres salivates me standin' here, this bottle full o' nitro will drop quicker'n I will—and when it hits the floor there won't be none o' you mavericks worth scrapin' together in a shovel!"

A sudden hush showed Steve he had given them something to think about.

"How 'bout it, Nate—and Ross—and you, there, Jasper? Yuh see, I took yore tip in yore note this mornin', 'bout usin' nitro myself some time. Well, this here's the time! Don't look like a little bottle o' colorless liquid could pack such a wallop—but seems like I read somewheres that nitro's got 'bout ten times the blastin' strength o' dynamite. Am I right, Nate?"

Nate swore thickly, his hands twitched nervously, but his eyes kept glued to the bright bottle held aloft in Steve's hand.

"Well, yuh can't stand there all day holdin' that nitro over us that-a-way!" It was Jasper who had found voice to combat this unexpected turn. "And when yore arm gets limp, why, we'll just naturally—"

"I been figgerin' you'd think o' some damn' fool idea like that!" Steve snarled. "So I'm deputizing' you and yore two brothers to disarm every hombre in this place—but first unbuckle yore own gun belts and drop 'em on the bar, in plain sight! And try to keep rememberin' that if anybody wants a quick

ticket to hell, just let him shoot me out from under this bottle o' nitro!"

Nate Blanton and his brothers stood uncertain whether to obey, but only for a moment. They saw Steve's left arm wave menacingly and heard him utter a new threat that galvanized them into activity.

"I'm givin' you Blantons three seconds to get a move on, then I'm like as not to get riled and toss this nitro into the whole crowd o' yuh! I'll take my chances o' duckin' outside before it hits the floor!"

Ten minutes later the bar was heaped high with discarded weapons. Many of the throng had not waited to have the Blantons take their weapons but edged cautiously forward, hands high, until they reached the mahogany counter, thereon to deposit their irons. Meanwhile, Steve's eyes were everywhere, watching for the slightest overt action. His right-hand gun was ready to settle with any single or pair of them, but he hoped it wouldn't be necessary.

And now, at his sharp command, every man lined up along the far wall of the saloon, his back to Steve, his arms still raised. The new sheriff of Gila Gulch, smiling at this strange-looking array of men who had once been too tough for the law to touch, perched himself on the end of the bar, to wait for the answer to that phone call he had made.

THE answer came, an hour later— came in the dust-streaked forms of a dozen horsemen, led by Sheriff Watson of the neighboring county. They filed in behind their leader and stared unbelievably at this sight within the saloon. Then a chorus of guffaws broke the tension. When they had had their laugh out, Steve spoke to Sheriff Watson:

"I didn't count on yore bringin' this many men, Sheriff. I on'y asked for three, four, so's they could ride herd on these here Blantons over to yore jail. My jail's sort of out o' repair, just now! Let's mosey!"

Watson eyed the three Blantons, at the far end of the line of prisoners. "Them red-heads are the Blantons, huh?"

I been thankin' my stars I ain't had 'em in my county, and now here yuh're wishin' 'em on me!"

Steve grinned. "On'y till we fix up the jail here and bring 'em back for hangin'. Or maybe *you'd* like that job, too?"

Sheriff Watson shook his head sourly. "What about these other hombres?"

"I'm comin' to that," Steve replied. "Boys," and he addressed the now tamed henchmen of the Blantons, "there's a train passin' through Gila Gulch in 'bout a hour from now. You-all are takin' it—without no return tickets. I'll keep yore hardware for yuh, so's yuh won't go get yoreselves into more devilment, somewheres else!"

So it was, a few minutes after the Blanton henchmen had been herded aboard the train—to the consternation of the conductor!—Steve Latimer mounted his cowpony and rode off alongside Sheriff Watson behind the Blanton trio and their guards.

And as he rode he explained to his neighboring sheriff how he had caught

and held the saloonful of gunmen until Watson's arrival. He saw Nate Blanton casting murderous glances over his shoulder at this recounting of his downfall; and when Steve brought forth the little bottle of colorless liquid to show to Watson, he saw Nate bite his lip and pale a trifle under his tan.

"Yeah," Steve finished, "Nate and his brothers knows all about nitro—don't yuh, Nate? Take a look at this and see if it's the same kind yuh blew up the jail with!"

Before Nate or the others realized what Steve was driving at, Steve tossed the glass bottle toward Nate. There was no time for any of them to spur their horses out of the way before the bottle should hit the ground, for Steve's throw had been short, and Nate's hands were tied behind his back!

The bottle hit the hard soil of the desert trail, broke, and the pale liquid made a tiny puddle on the packed-down sand.

"Just a bottle of eye-wash I got at the drug-store yesterday to get some sand out o' my eyes!" Steve explained dryly. "Ever use any, Nate?"

PROVES MAN IS GOD

A strange method of mind and body control, that leads to immense powers never before experienced, is announced by Edwin J. Dingle, F.R.G.S., well-known explorer and geographer. It is said to bring about almost unbelievable improvement in power of mind. Many report improvement in health. Others acquire superb bodily strength, secure better positions, turn failure into success. Often, with surprising speed, talents, ability and a more magnetic personality are developed.

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Most of us know that God is everywhere, but never realize that God cannot be everywhere without being also in us. And if He is in us, then all His wisdom, all His power—unlimited knowledge and infinite power—is likewise in us. If God is everywhere, then there is nothing but God, and we also are that—a completely successful human life being the expression of God in man. The Holy Spirit of the Bible is an actual living force in man, and through it we too can do "greater things than these." The method found by Mr. Dingle in Tibet is said to be remarkably instrumental in freeing our minds of the hypnotizing ideas which blind us to the vast power of this living force within us.



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KILLER'S RETURN

By John Starr

A Novelet of Water and Blood

Bill Dunn was a roped maverick, hate-seared. And when he found his old range held by paid gun-slicks, his flaming Colt sang a showdown song that had been seven years in the making.

BILL DUNN crossed the last up-building ridge and passed into the cool pines that clothed the mighty flank of Hatchet Mountain.

Dunn rode with a full seat in the saddle. His long, flat-bellied frame was thrust a little forward and his legs dropped straight down to bend at the knee, as is the



*"Hold it, Weltz," the judge said.
"We'll make no rush of things."*

manner of men who ride often and far. His pack horse came punching along behind without a lead rope.

With the aid of time and bitter circumstance, a man may strike the good feel of pine country from his thoughts but never from his deep memory. And sooner or later, that memory will bring him back to the country where he knew it first and he will find it clean and strong and the same. He will know that he is home again.

But Bill Dunn allowed no gladness to enter the hard order of his purpose. After seven bitter years, he was returning to strike the Crowder Country with every force he had, to smash it if he could. His

lean face was set, his gray eyes bleak, as he came out of the timber and hauled up at the edge of a long, narrow meadow.

A swift running stream took its source in the willow marsh at the upper end. Beyond the stream where the ground started to rise, there was a shed and a horse corral. In the first rank of trees above the corral a log cabin stood in a small green clearing.

A ribbon of smoke came from the cabin chimney, and some faint cross-stirring of air brought its pitchy scent across the meadow. There were three horses by the shed. Two men came out to stand in front of the cabin.

Bill rode straight up and drew rein ten feet from them. They stood watching his approach, their faces still, their eyes narrow with uncertainty.

"Howdy," one of the men said but there was no friendliness in his voice.

BILL surveyed them both for a moment in silence. Then he swung around and checked to see that one of the three saddles over the rail fence was a pack tree. After that, he got grimly down from his horse and went around to face the two waiting men.

"I'll give you just fifteen minutes to gather every damn thing that's yours and be gone from here," he said and his voice was cold beyond belief. Cold and bitter.

The men stood for a moment without moving or saying a word. Then the one who had spoken before, said from the corner of his mouth:

"What do you make of it, Joe?"

Joe shrugged and his voice was pitched to a tone of exaggerated surprise, "It beats me, Galt. You don't suppose he could be bluffing, do you?"

The other man ran an appraising eye along the hard length of Bill Dunn. "That might be it," he said. "Some folks will try the damndest things."

"He's a great big feller, ain't he?" Joe said. "And I bet he's as strong as a bull. They ought to put him in a cage."

"I'd have thought you'd know better than to say that," Dunn said in the thin voice of fury. He moved in and struck from the shoulder. His left fist slammed Joe's head back like a loose ball and a terrific right nearly tore away his jaw. As the man flopped down, Bill Dunn spun around, went in under Galt's rising gun and bore him down in a flying tackle.

They hit the hard-packed dirt with a numbing crash. Galt swore as the gun was lost from his hand. Bill drove two short, hard rights in over his heart.

Galt weaved and countered. He rolled with punches he could not block but he was no match in savage power and he was hammered down. He got up once—twice—even a third time. Then he was down and out and through. He never moved the last time.

DUNN stood looking down at him for a moment. Then he went over and got a bucket of water that was on the bench by the door. He doused it over Galt's head and waited while consciousness filtered back.

Galt got himself up as far as his hands and knees and stayed there for a long mo-

ment, his battered head hanging down. "Damn," he said at last. "You sure can hit."

"Get up," Bill Dunn told him harshly. "Get up and take your partner out of here before I change my mind and kill you both!"

Galt started to say some word but the light in Dunn's eyes checked him. He got up and went down to the corral. His mind hadn't had time to clear fully and he was a bit slow. But he got all three horses caught and saddled at last and brought them up to the cabin.

Joe was groaning some but he hadn't come around yet. Bill took him up like a sack of meal and threw him over the pack saddle.

"Tie him on and get to moving," he ordered. "His gun is on him and yours is yonder. I didn't take the loads out but don't make any mistakes."

Galt rubbed his swollen lips with the back of his hand. "Our rifles and duffle are inside," he said hoarsely. "How about it?"

"You'll leave now or never," Bill Dunn said bluntly.

Galt stood a moment in silence. Then he shrugged, lashed Joe onto the pack saddle. He went around to where his gun lay and picked it up. He didn't let any of his motions get fast. He shook the shells out before he put the weapon in its sheath with exaggerated care.

"All right," Bill Dunn said. "You can get going now and spread the news that I'm back. You can say it hither and yon, that Dunn is back. And you can say that before I'm through, I'll shove this damn country down a rat hole!"

Galt spun around and a light flamed in his eyes. "Dunn? Good Lord—why didn't you tell us you were Bill Dunn? If we'd known that—"

"Known!" Bill's tone cut through the other man's words like a whiplash. "What the hell are you trying to give me? I heard his crack about the cage!"

Galt met the fury of his eyes for one brief moment. Then he climbed wearily into his saddle and with the two other horses following, rode away down the meadow. He looked back just once as the trail went into the timber.

DUNN stood watching until they were gone. Something of the furious satisfaction that the conflict had brought him ebbed away. A deep weariness settled in its place and to escape the trouble of his thoughts, he went swiftly about the business in hand.

He unsaddled both horses and slung his things down in the yard. When he had turned the animals into the corral and measured them a feed of oats, he went back up the hill to the cabin he had built nine years before.

A quick tide of memories rose in defiance to Bill Dunn's will. In spite of himself, he flashed back to a picture of the year he'd taken over the Short Creek place.

He'd started this log house a month before his twenty-first birthday and the driving enthusiasm of his youth had left no room for doubts. There had been only the promise of great doings ahead. The Crowder Country had been good then, its people the finest on earth. Dunn swore in disgust and went inside.

Both the bunks were made up. There was a stack of old magazines on the table and a pile of dishes and grub. Two Winchesters stood in one corner and it was altogether plain that people had been living there for a considerable time.

Cold anger flamed again in Bill Dunn. He took every single thing except the rifles out of the cabin and flung it in a heap down by the shed. When he finished, he brought in his own few things.

It looked pretty bare when he was through but the hot flare of temper had died out of him. He stoked up the fire in the stove and set his coffee pot on to heat. He had four eggs packed in a can of oatmeal and he laid them out on the table with some bacon for his supper.

Then he went and stood in the doorway.

The sun was nearly gone. Only the soft gold of its last rays touched the pine tops beyond the meadow. There was no sound but the low-voiced stream and it came to Bill Dunn's mind, that in all the world, there is nothing so deeply lonesome as the mountain country when the sun is going down. It is like the sadness that comes when an old love is dead and the new one of tomorrow has not yet brightened the sky.

Dunn twisted a smoke and drew a long, impatient draught into his lungs. He had ridden fifteen hundred miles across mountain and desert to strike his blow. He threw down his cigarette and stamped it out. Then as he turned to go in, he paused abruptly and stood listening.

There was a horse coming down from the timber across the way. By the directness of its gait, Bill knew that it was under saddle and no wandering stray. He peered intently across the clearing.

After a little, a rider on a sorrel horse cut into the open, forded the stream and came on up toward the house.

DUNN watched without moving. There was no sign of emotion on his lean face, no hint of surprise when he saw that it was a girl.

She drew up a dozen feet from him and met the hard force of his gaze with the steady brown of her own. "Hello, Bill Dunn," she said gravely.

Dunn shifted a little on the balls of his feet. The tenseness went out of his body but his eyes remained the same.

The girl swung down and came forward with one small, gloved hand outstretched. "They told me in town that you'd passed through," she said simply. "So I rode around this way to tell you we're glad to have you back."

"Very kind," Bill Dunn said but there was no warmth at all in his tone. He took her hand briefly and let it go.

The shadow of hurt passed in her eyes but she forced a smile. "I guess you don't remember me."

"No," Dunn said.

The girl stood straight before the finality of his word and her eyes never shifted from his. In spite of himself, Bill couldn't miss the fine, clean strength of her or the unconscious pride in her bearing.

"When they told me you'd thrashed the marshal in town, I was afraid you'd be like this," she said gravely. "That's why I came."

"I struck Fred Creel because he's a fool," Dunn said harshly. "He prated to me of fresh starts and fresh beginnings. I have but one answer to such men."

"It's time you talked to yourself of such matters," she told him directly. "It

is more than three years since the law found it was wrong and turned you free. You should have left bitterness behind. You should have learned to live again."

Dunn got out the makings, wondering a little why he should be talking to her at all. No point to it. But he said, "Circumstance teaches every man his way. I've learned mine."

She looked squarely at him for a moment and there was a quick impatience in her eyes.

"I don't think you've learned at all, Bill. Where did you go when they turned you out?"

"On the move for the most part," he told her, and knew a quickening stir of anger. "I haven't stayed long in any place."

She half turned away and stood for a moment looking away up the meadow.

The sun had gone from the pines and even across the bold thrust of Hatchet Mountain, the thin, purple shadows were crowding the gold.

"I guess it's hard for us to understand," she said softly. "But you should have come home. You should have come back to your own people and let us make it up to you as best we could."

"My own people!" Bill said harshly. "My people—hell! Twelve of them sat like bleating, self-righteous sheep on my jury. They heard a handful of scattered, circumstantial evidence and decided I was guilty of murder. And then on the decision of those fools, Judge Harper, who'd known me all my life, muttered a lot of weak drivel about regrets and justice and duty and sent me to Canyon City for life. And as soon as I am gone, they move in on my land and my water like a flock of black buzzards. Heaven help me if these are my people!"

THE girl turned and took a quick step toward him, laid an impulsive hand on his arm.

"It must have been awful—knowing you were not guilty and feeling that you were the only man alive that believed it. It must have been even worse than I thought."

Bill Dunn said roughly:

"Worse than *you* thought? Who are you to know of such things?"

The color rose in the girl's cheeks but her eyes were steady and unafraid.

"I remember you before all the trouble came," she said simply. "I was only a little girl then."

Dunn struck down a desire to ask her who she was. He demanded bluntly, "What has all this got to do with now?"

"Everything," she said and smiled. "You haven't asked me to stay to supper so I'll have to ask myself. And I'll not only accept but I'll cook it for you." She stepped by his surprised protest and went into the cabin.

Bill Dunn followed her, still half resentful. He stood watching while she checked his supplies.

"You haven't much variety," she complained. "What were you going to have?"

"I had it in my mind to eat those eggs," Bill said.

"It'll be the eggs then and you'll have to share them with me," the girl declared. "How do you like them, fried, poached or scrambled?"

The straight line of Bill Dunn's mouth softened for an instant in the faintest hint of a smile. "Well," he admitted, "I mostly get 'em scrambled no matter how I start out. But if you should happen to have the knack of frying an egg so that it's kind of brown on both sides and frilly around the edges without being hard in the middle, I—"

The girl caught the change in his tone and gave him a smile. "I didn't invent that way of cooking them," she said, "but I've improved it."

He got soap and a towel from his war bag and went down to the stream to wash. When he came back the pleasant smell of hot food was in the air and the eggs were nearly done.

Bill, running his eye around the room, felt compelled to say, "This place would do with a lot of cleaning. There was a couple of mavericks holed in here and I scattered things some when I hove 'em out."

"I know," she said. "They've been here ever since the water trouble started with Shaw."

"They were riding horses with the Bar H brand," Dunn said. "That's Judge Harper's outfit and he has no right to put

men on my land for any reason at all. My title is still good."

The girl transferred the eggs to a plate and swung around. "Of course it's good. That's why dad put those men here to keep Carlton Shaw from fencing and establishing a water right on it. He felt that—"

Dunn stiffened. "Your dad? Are you telling me that Judge Harper is your father? The man that sent me to Canyon City?"

The girl paused before the look in his eyes. "Yes, of course. I'm Doris Harper. I was hoping you'd remember."

BILL DUNN'S mouth drew into a straight, hard line. "I might have known it," he said thinly. "I might have had brains enough to know that you turning up here was part of the game. The Short Creek water must be damned important to your old man if he's willing to use his daughter to bait a jailbird!"

The color rushed to the girl's face before the lashing blow of his words. Then it ebbed away again to leave her white, trembling with anger.

"You mean you dare to think—" she dropped the plate of eggs to the corner of the table and they slid off onto the floor unnoticed.

"What the hell would I think?" Bill Dunn snarled. "And you damn near got by with it, too! Your sweet friendship stuff, nearly got under my hide!"

Doris Harper raised a hand to her throat. "Oh, how can a man's thoughts be so rotten?" She started by him toward the door but Dunn was in her way and his big hands on her shoulders, stopped her dead in her tracks.

"It doesn't become you to talk of rotten thoughts," he said harshly. "You figured I'd be lonesome and weary and that I'd be easy in the hands of a pretty woman! Well you're a pretty woman all right—a damn beautiful one from the outside at least. But I warn you, you're playing with no school kid when you play with me. You're apt to get more than you bargain for."

She stood very straight before the weight of his hands and her eyes were squarely on his. "You are terribly

warped," she said evenly. "But I'm not a bit afraid of you."

"If you aren't, you're a fool," Dunn exploded. He jerked her roughly against him and kissed her hard on the mouth.

She made no effort to escape but her lips were cold and lifeless under his. Their touch killed the fire of rage within him and he thrust her away with an empty feeling of defeat.

She swayed a moment before him and her brown eyes showed almost black with anger and scorn. "Are you all through now?"

"Yes," Bill Dunn said hoarsely. "I am through. Get going."

"I'll not go, letting you think I'm afraid," Doris Harper cried, and struck him full across the face with her open hand. When he didn't move, she struck him again and again. The blows rang out sharp and brittle in the stillness.

Dunn waited without flinching. A little ribbon of blood had started from the corner of his mouth. He noticed a red smear of it across the fingers of her right hand as she stepped back.

The fury was suddenly gone from her eyes.

"Oh, Bill, I'm sorry. So terribly sorry—But why can't you try to understand?"

Bill Dunn said, "Are you through with your fool slapping? Are you all through?"

For an instant she stood as though seeking some word. Then she nodded helplessly and went by him through the door into the yard.

Dunn swung around in time to see her stop short. He caught the sound of horses coming up the hill from the creek. Rubbing a lock of hair back from his forehead, he checked the looseness of his Colt's gun. Four riders were coming up by the corral. One glance at the leader was enough to set Bill's nerves up hard.

II

SEVEN years hadn't changed the huge bulk of Judge Morgan Harper or lessened his great mane of white hair. He rode with his great body heaved forward in the saddle and the thrust of his black eyes was like a lance.

Doris stood quietly by her horse as the two came up and drew rein.

"The timing was bad," Bill said derisively. "You're a minute and a half late and it spoils the righteousness of the whole thing. Keep your hands away from your guns."

Harper cast a long, appraising look at Dunn before he turned to his daughter. "How is it that you are here, Doris? I thought you said you were going to town."

The girl turned for a brief glance at Bill before she swung wearily into the saddle.

"I guess I made a mistake, dad."

The lank rider behind Harper forced his horse forward and his little eyes were mean, "Boss, if you want me to—"

"Hold it, Weltz," the judge said sharply. "We'll make no rush of things here. Is everything all right, Doris?"

She waited a moment and then her voice was very grave. "It's all right as you mean it, dad. But otherwise it's all wrong. Maybe you can explain things so that Bill Dunn will understand."

Bill waited, dead still, watching the lean man with the hard eyes. He didn't shift his hand toward his gun but he was ready.

"I had word that you'd passed through Steptoe," Harper said to Dunn. "I saddled and rode at once but I seem to have been late. I met my two men on the trail and you'd used them hard."

"They were lucky to go from here alive," Bill told him bluntly. "This is my land and my water."

"Your violence was a mistake," the old man said gravely. "Those are both good boys and I have had them here for your advantage, to prevent the fencing of a water right."

Bill shifted his weight onto the balls of his feet and his words came out singly and hard.

"You made a lot of hollow words when you sent me away, Harper. You mentioned duty and law and regrets because you'd known me a long time. But all the time you said your drivel, you had a hungry eye on the Short Creek water. You were waiting the day when you could get it. Well damn you, I've still got it—I'll fence it solid, and wait the day when the rest of your springs go dry and every rancher in the valley is busted and has to

move out. I wouldn't save you if you crawled on your bellies!"

The old judge waited a moment before he said quietly, "I am sorry that you have returned with your mind so. It will defeat you in the end. You could make a good life here if you would."

"I'll make fences," Bill Dunn said. "And I'll beef the stock that breaks 'em. Get going now and ride out of here. And the next time you try to get around me, don't count on a woman to do it and if you send a gunman, don't let it be weasels like the ones you have now."

The color flamed high in Harper's face as he swung his horse around. "Come on," he said to the others and his voice was hoarse with an effort to control it.

The man, Weltz, moved beside him. Doris hesitated an instant as though she would speak, then she, too, turned away and spurred after her father.

Dunn stood watching them go. When they had disappeared in the timber beyond the meadow, he went bleakly back into the cabin.

HE got a can of beans from his pack and dumped them in the frying pan. While they were heating, he scraped up the eggs that Doris Harper had cooked and threw them out back.

He was nearly through when he caught the sound of another horse coming across the meadow. He didn't get up or even change his position but he pulled out his Colt and laid it on the table before him.

The horse came straight up into the yard and somebody called, "Hey Dunn! Are you there?"

Bill took a last swallow of coffee and set the cup down. "Yes," he said to the man he couldn't see. "What the hell do you want with me?"

There was a grunt and the squeak of saddle leather as somebody swung down. Spurs rattled across the yard and an enormously tall man loomed in the doorway. He stood looking into the gloom for a long moment before he said,

"Hello, Dunn. I guess you don't remember me."

"I remember you," Bill said. "You are Carlton Shaw. You started running cat-

tle through here the year before they sent me away. What do you want?"

The big man nodded and came on in. Bill watched him steadily.

"I heard you were back," Shaw said. "One of my riders was in town when you passed through."

"The news of my coming seems to have spread," Bill observed dryly and waited for the other man to go on.

Shaw chuckled. "Well you can't expect to lam hell out of the Steptoe city marshal and then not have the news get around."

"Get to the point," Bill said impatiently. "You didn't come here because I dusted Fred Creel."

Shaw laughed again. "All right. I see you want action with your talk and I'm no man to beat around the bush. I heard you were back and I came here tonight because I want to make you a proposition before anyone else gets to you."

Bill waited.

Shaw let a minute pass before he said bluntly, "Dunn, I want the Short Creek water."

Bill watched him, saw the eagerness in every line of his great body.

"A lot of folks are going to want this water before I am through."

"Yes," Shaw agreed. "A lot of people are going to want it in the next few years. But the one that has it, can control the whole of the Crowder Country. This water is the key to all the upper end!"

Dunn waited a moment and then said very softly, "Well, I'm the guy that's got it."

Carlton Shaw set both his closed fists on the table and leaned across. His long, narrow face was tense and eager. There was an urgent ring to his voice.

"That's why I'm here. That's why I came tonight. And I have no piker's offer to make you. Listen, you have the water. I have better than four thousand head of stock. Neither is worth a damn without the other but together, we can write our own ticket. We can run the country."

"My water is not for sale, trade or bargain," Bill told him flatly. "I intend to hold it."

"But good lord," Shaw protested, "take a look at it. It'll take you years to build

even a small herd. Together, we can start like a landslide and take everything with us."

Bill got out his tobacco and built a careful smoke.

The tall man lowered his voice a little and spoke again.

"And I ain't missing another thing, Dunn. I ain't overlooking the fact that you'd likely be pleased to bust this Crowder Country wide open. God knows you have reason."

"You are wasting your time," Dunn said bluntly. "I'll keep my water."

Shaw stood back and the tense breath went out of him in a long drawn sigh. "My deal is a good one."

Bill finished his smoke and put it between his lips. But he didn't light it and he didn't say anything.

After an uneasy moment, the tall man grunted goodby and went out. Dunn heard him mount up and ride away in the night.

III

WHEN five minutes had gone by, Bill got up and put his dirty plate and cup to soak in the frying pan. After that, he lighted his cigarette and went out to sit on the bench by the door.

The thin white of a half moon silvered the yonder pines, marked them out like the sails of phantom ships riding in the sea of jet-black shadows. Down in the willows of the meadow bottom, the frogs had struck up their evening croaking.

Bill sat listening. His eyes were half closed and in the soft dark, some of the bitter hardness went from his face. There was peace here and rest for a weary man.

There was some faintly disturbing thing deep down in Bill Dunn. Without his conscious bidding, his mind brought him back to the girl who had ridden that way and had stayed to cook him a dinner that they had never eaten. He took a long impatient suck at his smoke.

"Well, hell, she looked as if she meant it. Maybe—" then with a single motion, he crushed out the fire of his cigarette and got to his feet.

For a moment he stood dead still. It took him time to place the thing that had

warned his senses. It was the silence. The frogs had become utterly still.

Bill reached around inside the door and got his Winchester. With it in his hands, he crossed the yard in a half dozen silent bounds. When he reached the deeper shadow of a pine clump, he paused to listen again.

It was a long time before his straining ears picked up the sound that had disturbed the frogs. When he did, he recognized it as the soft punching of horse's hoofs coming through the meadow grass beyond the stream.

The rider stopped a moment in the willows, then splashed across and came up the hill toward the house. Bill Dunn watched and thumbed back the hammer of his gun.

He saw the horseman haul up and dismount in the heavy shadow of the shed. He waited until the figure had advanced nearly to the house before he said harshly:

"You stop right there! Get your hands up high!"

There was a quick gasp and a small voice said, "Oh!"

Dunn swore under his breath. He lowered his rifle. "Now what?" he demanded and went across the open moonlight to face Doris Harper.

The girl hadn't raised her hands. She stood quietly waiting while he came up to her. Dunn stopped a pace away.

"This beats anything yet," he said drily. "You'd better give me your gun."

He saw her chin go out a little and she made a defensive gesture with her left hand.

"I haven't got a gun."

"Maybe not," Bill grunted. "But you just hid something under your coat. What was it?"

"It is eggs," Doris said and brought a cardboard box from under her coat. "I spilled yours on the floor so I got these and rode over. I was going to leave them on your doorstep for breakfast."

"Well, I'm damned," Bill said helplessly. He took the box she held out to him but he couldn't think of anything else to say.

The frogs down by the stream were taking up their song again. One by one they joined in, the high ones and the low ones

until it was a solid, ringing chorus in the night again.

"I'll have to go now," Doris said. "I'll have to be getting back."

Bill Dunn shifted restlessly. He felt awkward before her open friendliness and it made him resentful because he didn't know how to meet it.

"There was no call for this," he said. "But thanks."

The girl turned as if to go, then hesitated. For a moment they stood listening to the frogs and there was no word passed. Then she spoke:

"I couldn't leave it the way it was—with you thinking all those terrible things. Neither dad nor I knew the other was coming."

AND with a suddenness that shook him, Bill believed her. With the belief, came the first real pleasure he had known in years and he knew a desire to tell her so. But he couldn't seem to get the words together beyond saying, "All right then." It sounded flat and incomplete. It filled him with quick impatience at himself.

"Everything will be fine if you will just let people be friends," Doris said eagerly. "Dad just happened to be the judge when your trouble came and he had to do what he thought was right. But it was hard for him and a hundred times worse after French Joe confessed. He went to Canyon City the day they turned you out but you were already gone. If you only knew how hard he tried to find you after that."

"I didn't stick anywhere," Bill said. "I wasn't good company for any man. Not even—" he broke off in the middle of a sentence and pushed the girl into the shadow with a hard hand.

The song of the frogs had cut off as though slashed with a knife and a man was running through the open moonlight toward the house. He was bent low to the ground and he wasn't making any noise.

Bill Dunn set the box of eggs down on the bench. "Get inside quick!"

A shaft of moonlight struck in through the south window and touched Dunn's heap of things on the bunk to the left. Bill made a quick survey there and then took the girl across into the black shadow

by the stove. He felt out a chair and pushed her into it.

Doris Harper caught his arm for an instant in mute appeal and he found her's briefly in warning with his left hand as he laid down his rifle and drew his Colt.

Then there was a long period of utter silence. Minutes dragged by with the endless weight of hours. Bill could feel the presence of the girl close behind him.

Then the open frame of the door was filled and a man stood looking in. He held a short-barreled gun half leveled to his shoulder. For a time, he stood looking at the bunk where the moonlight struck. He lifted the gun full up and took careful aim. The double, bellowing roar of a shotgun thundered out.

Bill Dunn's shots were so close after it, that their dry bark sounded like an echo.

The man in the door stood up, full and very straight. Then his gun slithered from limp fingers. He fell backward stiff and hard. His boots stayed across the sill.

Bill didn't move from his tracks until he had shoved fresh loads into his gun. He said flatly to the girl, "You stay right there."

He went across the room, stepped over the body and went outside. The horses were nervous, stamping, but there was nothing else.

"Somebody sent a boy to the mill," Dunn muttered grimly. He took the man by the collar to drag him into the moonlight so he could see his face.

Somehow he felt no surprise at the man's identity, only a deadening sense of helpless futility. These things that were moving against him. He got up and went back to the door.

"It's all over," he said and wondered at the quietness of his own voice. "You'd better ride for home. There is no telling what the shooting will bring."

In an instant, the girl was beside him, white-faced and tense. "Who was it—who—?" she made a desperate gesture toward the still body.

"That does not concern you for now," Dunn said. "But you'd best be gone from here." He took her arm and started her down the hill.

WHEN they came to the shelter of the shed, she stood back while he brought her horse and tightened the cinch. Then she swung into the saddle and sat a moment looking down, held out her hand to him imploringly.

"Bill won't you come home with me? Won't you come and stay with father and me until this thing is settled? I'm afraid if you stay here—"

"No," Bill Dunn said. "That's no way. Nothing will happen to me. But there is one thing—"

"Yes?"

"That you tell no single person of your visit here tonight. Not now or ever. You hear?"

"Yes. But—"

"There are no buts," Dunn said. "And as for the rest, I'll do the best I can with what there is. Goodby."

"Bill," she said desperately, "you'll remember? You won't forget about our being friends?"

"No," Dunn said gravely. "I won't forget that."

He took the hand she offered him and held it for a moment. She looked very small, frightened, in the moonlight and he wished there was something more he could say.

"You come our way soon," Doris Harper said and turned her horse away. "We'll be waiting for you."

Bill Dunn stood watching while she rode away. He had his feet punched down solidly in the dirt but there was a weary sag to his shoulders.

When the last sound of her horse had died away, he went back up to the cabin and looked again at the still body of Ed Weltz. "A hell of a mess," he said aloud. "One hell of a mess!"

DUNN got a couple of gunny-bags and threw them over the dead man. He didn't like the white shine of moonlight on his face. After that, he got his Winchester and went to sit on the bench again.

For a long time he sat there watching and listening, pondering his problem.

After a while the moon went down and the stars moved in close and bright overhead. The frogs sang until the cold set in with the small hours. Then they fell

away by ones and twos until there were none left. Nothing came to the meadow.

Bill rose at last and stamped his feet against the chill, took his time from the stars. It wasn't so far until the first day.

"It's the only out," he said aloud. "I don't like it but there is no other thing to do. If I stay, her father himself will make a try for me and I'll have to deal with him the same. If I go, she'll never have to know and it makes no matter, there are no long stops on a one-way trail like mine."

He went into the cabin and started to pack his few belongings. By the time the east had grayed enough to supply a thin light, he had them slung on his pack horse and was ready for the trail.

He mounted up and sat for a moment considering which way to go. He could think of no single place over his back trail to which he wished to return. There was new country to the north and that seemed best. He touched his black gelding with a spur and started for the timber. The next instant, he sat up hard and ripped his Winchester from its saddle boot! A horse had whinnied in the willow brakes.

IV

BILL searched the thick of the trees with a hard, sweeping eye but there was nothing moving. Then his mind got to working and he put his rifle back with a grunt. This was only Ed Weltz's horse, still tied where the gunman had left him.

Bill rode down across the open and into the willows. A tough hammer-headed little buckskin was tied there. It wasn't the same horse that Weltz had been riding when he was with Harper and Dunn smiled grimly when he saw that it wore no brand. The only thing that had been overlooked, seemed to be getting a killer good enough for the job.

Bill turned the animal loose and started it off with a slap on the rump. Then he swung into the saddle again, gathered his pack horse and struck north into the timber.

The sleepless night had left no outward sign on him other than to flatten the line of his jaw a little and narrow his lips. But Bill Dunn felt old and very weary. It passed in his mind that in all the long

trails he had traveled before, this place had always been at the end. There had always been the deep-laid knowledge that sooner or later, he would return. But now, his mind would carry him no farther than the fact that he was going away and he cursed bitterly at the weight of his thoughts.

Where the trail crossed a rocky spur, he paused a moment for a last look back. The meadow spread green and soft below him. There was a patch of frost in a low spot beyond the stream and the flanking pines looked still and gray for the sun was not yet upon them.

Bill saw the hammer-headed buckskin clear the willows and go up across the last open ground at the head of the meadow.

The animal moved at the shambling trot common to a riderless horse going home. Dunn watched it for a moment without thought, then jerked suddenly straight in his saddle. The hackle hairs rose along the back of his neck! The buckskin was not headed toward Judge Harper's Bar H, that lay to the east. It was headed straight southwest toward Carlton Shaw's mule-shoe spread in Winter Valley!

The explosion of this fact and the possibilities that it brought, struck Dunn with the force of a physical blow. His mind raced through the angles that were opened before him.

Though Bill had neither trust nor liking for Shaw, his mind had been centered on the single belief that it had been Harper who had sent Weltz to murder him. But if the killer had come from Winter Valley on a Muleshoe horse, it could either mean that the two ranchers had joined together against him or that Weltz had been taking Judas' pay from Harper while he was spy and henchman of Shaw!

Bill Dunn's mind shifted back to the girl for an instant and with no conscious direction of thought, he made his decision. He swung his horse around, scratched it with a spur and struck out at a swinging lope after the riderless buckskin.

THE trail to Winter Valley led up out of the Short Creek recess, swung across the timbered slope of Hatchet Mountain and dropped down into the lava country where Shaw's holdings lay.

Bill didn't catch sight of the hammer-

head again but he picked up its trail in the timber and saw that it hadn't changed its course. A very hard smile pulled at his lips and he slowed his pace to a jog-trot. An hour more or less didn't make any difference in the job he was set to do and he wanted the buckskin to get in well ahead of him. As he rode, he took out his Colt and checked each of the six loads.

The sun was nearly two hours in the sky when Dunn crossed the last of the lava rims above Winter Valley. The buildings and corrals of Shaw's outfit lay spraddled out around an aspen spring on the flat below.

There was a big herd of red stock bunched under the fence at the lower end of the little valley and their restless bawling lifted up loud and discordantly in the morning still.

"Bellow and be damned to you," Bill Dunn growled. "You'll right soon be on your way." He went down the slope and across the dusty plain at a shambling trot.

There were five saddled horses along a harness rack by the barn but the buckskin wasn't one of them.

Bill saw that there were five men bunched on the sun-bleached porch of the ranch house and the great frame of Carlton Shaw loomed in their center. As the rider drew near, they shifted and spread a little. All stood facing him and waited in a tense silence.

Bill Dunn rode straight into the yard and hauled up. He said, "Whoa, boy," to his pack horse and got out tobacco and papers. He twisted up a smoke and got it going before he favored the watching line with any slight attention or word. Then he ran a sardonic eye along them and said:

"You guys look foolish as hell standing there in a row. Why don't you relax?"

Shaw grinned ruefully and took a step forward.

"All right, Dunn. But you can't blame the boys for being a little jumpy. Word has filtered around that you play pretty rough some times."

Bill Dunn blew a thin ribbon of smoke from his nose and watched the tall rancher through the rising swirl of it.

"Your outfit looks like a coyote pack to me," he said flatly. "They strike me as a

sorry bunch—but that does not matter. It is you that I came to see."

Shaw's eyes narrowed before the coldness of the words and he lifted his hand a trifle to still the rumble from his men.

"Your pack horse is loaded, Dunn," he said. "You seem ready for the trail."

"I am," Bill said. "Yesterday, you made me an offer. I come now to make you one."

Shaw rubbed his lips with the back of his hand and a bright light flickered very deep down in his eyes.

"Last night, you would have none of my offer. What's your proposition now?"

Bill thrust forward a little in his seat and jerked a thumb at the other men. "What I have to say is to you alone. If you want to hear it, all right. If you don't, all right."

The light showed again in Shaw's eyes. "Get on down to the horses," he ordered the men. "I'll join you there in a little."

In a sullen silence they obeyed. Bill met their hard, hostile eyes one by one as they trooped off the porch.

Shaw waited for a moment, until the others were half way to the corral, "All right. What's on your mind?"

Bill got down on the side away from the other man and went around his horse. He walked over to within a few feet of the rancher and threw down his smoke, carefully stamped it out before he said:

"That guy Wertz, that's been riding for Harper, rode over my way last night late. He shot some holes in my bunk and I killed him deader than all hell!"

Shaw whistled softly. "He did! I told you you'd better throw in with me."

V

BILL looked him right in the eyes. He smiled without any humor. "Cut it out. The act is over. I followed that buckskin horse straight over here. Don't raise your voice or go for your gun unless you want to get killed."

For an instant the color went out of Carlton Shaw's face and fear showed stark naked in his eyes. Then he threw a quick look at his waiting riders and his courage came back. A hard grin pulled at his mouth.

"You damn fool. What chance do you

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think you've got of riding out of here alive?"

"A swell one," Bill Dunn told him flatly. "You're going with me."

Shaw licked his lips. "You're crazy. You're crazy as hell. One word or move from me, and the boys'll blast you wide open!"

"Maybe. But we're never going to find out. You ain't going to make that move. Did you ever have to hang around for a day or two while some poor devil was dying of a gut-shot? It's an awful thing to see."

The tall man's face grew damp and he said hoarsely, "You can't get by with this. My men—"

"To hell with your men!" Bill Dunn told him. "I told you they were nothing but a coyote pack. To prove it, I'm going to walk right down there with you while you tell 'em to get that fenced herd started over the hills toward my Short Creek water. You can pick your own words but you're going to make 'em think everything is right."

Shaw ran a shaking hand across his mouth. His voice was hollow with panic. "Listen—you can't do this—we can make a deal. We can—"

"It's up to you to convince 'em," Bill Dunn repeated. "Let's go."

Shaw's face was ashen, his lips blue. He opened his mouth in an effort to speak but Bill ordered him to be still. There was a horse coming up from the other side of the buildings and it was close on.

"I don't have to tell you to watch yourself," Dunn warned softly. The next instant, Doris Harper rode around the corner of the ranch house.

THE girl drew up short when she saw the two men and blank amazement marked her face. She started to speak but no words came and Bill Dunn said sardonically.

"I guess there ain't any fool-killer around here or he'd have had me. Your act last night had me fooled complete. I didn't think you were in on it."

"In on—" she started faintly.

Shaw's four men were coming up the hill at a run and there was a triumphant grin on the tall man's face. He ripped

out his gun and jammed it deep into Bill Dunn's belly. He exploded in a cackle of relief.

"Get your hands up, you jailbird punk! You'll start nothing now unless you want to take this skirt to hell with you!"

He took Bill's Colt and slung it on the ground.

The four hard-faced riders closed in, guns ready.

"Watch this bird," Shaw ordered. "Blow hell out of him if he makes a break!" He turned to Doris Harper and his voice dropped to an insinuating rasp. "Get down, sweetheart. We've got what you're looking for."

Bill Dunn saw the horror gather in her eyes. She lifted a desperate hand to her throat and Shaw's voice raised a little.

"You come to the right place if you're looking for your old man. He wasn't feeling so good a minute ago but I guess he's likely come out of it now. Fetch him out, boys."

The girl gave a strangled little cry as she jumped down from her horse and started running toward the house. Shaw waited until she was close to the steps before he stuck out a foot and sprawled her in the dirt.

WITH a snarl, Bill Dunn lunged forward. He sent one man spinning with a slashing left hand and staggered another with a right to the body. But a third was upon him before he could turn, struck him a murderous blow with a pistol barrel and as he went down.

"All right, Hal," Shaw said. "But if he makes another break, let him have it."

Bill pushed himself up as far as his hands and knees. The blood was running down across his head and dripping from his chin. He saw the girl crouching by the side of the steps. Her eyes fixed in horror on the house. Two of the men were half dragging Judge Harper out onto the porch.

The old man's white hair was a matted smear of blood and his face was gray and drawn. His legs had barely enough strength to carry him but there was no fear in his eyes until he caught sight of his daughter. A groan escaped him then.

Doris sprang up to go to him but Shaw shoved her down against the porch again.

"Never mind the sob stuff. He'll keep for now and we've got business to do."

"Damn you," Harper stormed. "There'll come a day when I'll—"

But Shaw turned his back on the old man and grinned dourly at Bill Dunn. "Well, hard-case, what do you think of the set-up now?"

Bill got to his feet and stood swaying a moment. He wiped a flow of blood with the back of his hand.

"You were riding too high for my deal last night," Shaw said. "The one I'm going to make you now, ain't nearly so good but you're going to take it."

Bill Dunn let his eyes shift around the whole group and then brought them back to the tall, grinning man who stood by the girl.

"You seem to have your pants in the saddle. What is this deal?"

Shaw's head moved forward and Bill saw the same expression in his eyes that he'd seen the night before when he'd made his bid for the Short Creek water. It was a deep-burning fire of fanatical greed.

"You're going to get the blood cleaned off your face and ride to town with me, Dunn. When we get there, we're going to the land office and I'm going to give you one hundred dollars for your title to the Short Creek spread. And just so you won't get out of hand, the boys can keep the other two here until I get back. And may heaven help 'em if I ain't here by dark!"

"Listen, Bill," the old judge said thickly, "make him take Doris along and turn her loose before you sign. He can keep me as a hostage."

Bill Dunn looked Harper straight in the eyes and his voice was flat and utterly cold. "Whatever made you think I'd do anything for you? You never eased the way when you skidded me into Canyon City."

THE old man stiffened before the lashing words. Shaw laughed.

"I figured you'd think of your own skin when it came to a pinch, Dunn. Let's get headed for town."

"Wait a minute," Bill said. "I ain't getting much out of this the way it stands. I ought to get something more."

"You're getting a hundred bucks and

your worthless life," Shaw said in heavy contempt. "You take it or die right here."

Bill swayed a little on his feet. His voice grew plaintive. "You might make it five hundred. With five hundred I could—"

"You're only getting a hundred so it'll look right," Shaw told him. "And to make sure that you don't come back and beef about it later you're going to leave a written confession that you killed Ed Wertz in cold blood. After the trimming you gave the marshal in Steptoe yesterday, he'd be right willing to pick you up and hang something on you."

Bill shrugged resignedly. His gaze shifted around to the girl who stood stiff and tense by the steps.

"All right, Shaw," he said wearily. "You seem to have thought out all the angles. I guess I ain't in a spot to choose. But there's just one thing before we go—"

Shaw regarded him with hard eyes. "Well?"

One side of Bill Dunn's mouth twisted bitterly and he swung away from the girl to jerk a thumb at the old judge. "Ever since that old buzzard sent me to Canyon City, I've waited the day when I could bust him down. If I can have just one sock at him now I'll be ready for the trail again."

Dunn heard the girl draw in a long gasp of air but the old judge only squared his shoulders and said no word.

A puzzled light showed in Shaw's eyes for a moment. Then he nodded. "You sure remember your private hates," he said. "But if that's all you want, you can have it. I got a lot of good out of socking him myself!"

He turned to the man Hal, and said briefly, "Get down and throw a saddle on my horse."

Bill wiped the blood from his face with his sleeve. "I've waited a long time for this. I used to lie awake nights in my cell planning it." He started across the yard grimly but stopped dead by the steps when the girl threw herself defiantly before him.

"Hit me," she cried. "Hit me if that's what your crazy warped mind wants. But don't you dare touch him!"

"What the hell!" Bill Dunn exploded.

Both his hands shot out to her shoulders. With a single heave, he swept her off her feet and hurled her across the yard. She smashed down a full three yards away and rolled two more.

Bill Dunn never paused. He let the full effort of his pitch carry him around and his left fist exploded like a bomb on Shaw's chin as he swung back from giving his order.

The blow spun the man like a top. Before he could fall Dunn had him locked around the neck from behind. His left arm hand had ripped the Colt gun from Shaw's thigh.

The two men who had taken Dunn's blows a moment before were quick to get into action.

IT was point-blank range. He couldn't miss. He had them both falling at once as their guns roared futilely in the dirt.

Hal and the fourth rider had started down the hill together for Shaw's horse.

Bill Dunn managed to fling his living shield around in time to catch the slogging impact of their opening volley. He missed his first shot. He shot again to sprawl Hal down writhing in the yard.

The fourth man held his gun low firing as fast as he could fan the hammer.

Bill felt the raking burn of one bullet across his neck. The dull force of two more ripping into Shaw's body. He took careful aim and put a wicked black hole straight between the wild eyes of the fourth man.

Somehow the dead weight of Shaw's body took Dunn to his knees then and by the time he was up again, the girl was by his side. The old judge was across the yard.

Bill ran his eye around the men who were down. There was no menace left. He said gravely, "I am sorry that I slammed you down so hard. But I wanted you well clear of the guns."

The girl shook her head and her eyes were filled with deep concern, "Oh, Bill, I'm all right. But you—"

"These scratches of mine don't count,"

Bill Dunn said gently. "A fool like me, ought to be hit over the head. Look to your father now, he's the one that's been the worst hurt."

"I took a beating," the old judge rumbled. "But I'll survive. Doris, how did you come to ride into this thing?"

"I went to Bill's last night, dad. While I was there a man came and tried to kill him and Bill shot him. He tried to keep me from seeing who it was—it was Ed Weltz. When I got home to tell you, you were gone. I waited for daylight and followed your trail here—"

Harper nodded grimly. "It was Weltz that told me to ride here last night. He said a Shaw rider had brought him word for me to come. That Shaw was licked and ready to come to terms over our boundary and water. When I got here at daylight, the devils jumped me and smashed me down. They thought Weltz would have killed Dunn and they were going to leave my body there with his to look as if we'd killed each other. Just before they were ready to go, Weltz' horse came in and they knew he'd slipped."

Bill shifted his weight restlessly. "I've been a little slow in putting things together."

Doris Harper took one swift look at Bill's pack horse and when she turned back to face him, there was a soft light shining from the depths of her eyes.

"You have all your things there, Bill. Were you ready for the trail when you found that horse?"

"Yes," he admitted slowly. "I was moving out."

"Why?" The girl's single word was very low.

Bill Dunn fumbled awkwardly for speech that wouldn't come. "Well—"

But the girl understood and didn't wait. She went swiftly to lay her hands against him. "Oh, Bill, Bill—suppose you'd gone without ever knowing!"

At the touch of her fingers, some old, forgotten thing came to life in Bill Dunn. The bitter weight of the years was gone.

"Be still," he commanded softly and lifted both his big arms to take her. "We will have no talk of such things. This is the way it was figured to be."

THE WHITE GODDESS OF KMER

By ARTHUR J. BURKS

Men sought the remnants of the Kmer—and the golden riches of a lost civilization. Ross Thomen pierced the jungle—and found a living horror. The altar, and its goddess.

THE steamy darkness was filled with danger, and all four of us knew it. Out of it, apparently from all directions, came the eerie throbbing which should have ended when the last of the supposedly extinct Kmers had died, hundreds, perhaps thousands of years before. The four of us were camped in a shadowy ravine, deep in the fastnesses of Samar—fastnesses into which, our Tao guides had told us, before they had deserted us in unholy terror, no white man had even penetrated. Terror was our constant companion. It had been our constant companion for the last week, during which we had pushed doggedly forward to the solution of an enigma which had puzzled the ethnologists since the first Kmer ruins had been found in Siam.

We had heard whispers, in Formosa, of all places, to the effect that remnants of the Kmers were to be found in Samar, though no one had actually seen them and lived to tell about it. Our expedition, during the last week, had been followed by hellish bad luck. Back along our track through the steaming jungle rested the bones of dead men.

Our fire blazed up brightly. We didn't need the fire for heat, for the jungle itself was a furnace. We needed it because it kept away some of the terror, though through the darkness could be seen at intervals a suggestion of the terror—two pairs of greenish eyes. They had been with us every night, now, for a week.

APIECE of wood popped, and the sound was like a rifle-shot. Peter Lauriston, who had been with me on a dozen expeditions into the little-known places of the earth, jumped as though he had been shot. He turned a greenish face on me, his eyes filled with entreaty.

"It isn't worth it, Ross," he said. "Not even to increase the knowledge of mankind. We've lost half a dozen men on this trip, and they were all good men. None of us will get back, if we don't start now!"

His lips quivered as he spoke. Lauriston's usually calm composure in all circumstances had given away to an attack of the jitters which he could not control. Frank Rowley and Caswell Jode didn't say anything, or even look up when the popping sound came. They were sitting just within the circle of light cast by the flames, their heads sunk between their knees, utterly beaten. They had resigned themselves to death, were only praying now that it would come soon, and not be too horrible.

"If we only knew what had happened to Kelly!" said Peter. Jubal Kelly, the toughest of my outfit, had gone off his nut two nights before. He had seen the two pairs of eyes, close together, and had simply charged straight at them. He had gone barging into the dark, before anybody could stop him—and we hadn't found a trace of him afterward. His footprints vanished just beyond the point where we had last been able to see him. It gave an eerie touch to a situation that was becoming more eerie as the hours wore leadenly away. The thumping sounds didn't help. We all knew what caused them. Miles away, long poles of bamboo, with "heads" of hardwood, were being struck against flat rocks of different sizes. Long poles, grasped at the height of the eyes, raised and lowered swiftly, in a crazy rhythm, striking against those rocks, producing a kind of music—a hellish kind of music.

"Pete," I said, "how would you feel if that drumming meant that Jubal Kelly were being sacrificed to some pagan idol, up there in the ravine?"

Lauriston stiffened. Some of his trem-



bling ceased. My other two men raised their heads for the first time, sanity stirring in his eyes that had been dull with malaria for days on end. My question had pierced their feverish lethargy of terror. Lauriston rose to his feet, swaying like a drunken man. He licked his cracked and bleeding lips.

"I'd feel I should go on through, to the showdown," he said calmly.

The firewood popped again. As though his rising had been a signal the throbbing of the strange music increased in tempo. I had the feeling scores of eyes watched every move we made; savage ears heard and somehow understood our words; swift feet and hungry lips took word of our coming, of everything that happened to us, away to wherever the pestles were beating. That our unseen antagonists looked upon us as doomed men I knew very well.

And yet, they had had nothing to do with the fangs that had struck in the night, slaying the first of our men to go. He had died in horrible convulsions, his body bloated to twice its normal size. Some member of the cobra family, I knew, though I had caught the merest flash of it and had missed it with a pistol shot. No human agency had had anything to do with that—or had it? Here in this place, this gateway to abysmal, ancient horror, how could one be sure?

I stared around at the jungles. Snaky lianas hung from dead tree limbs. The odor of evil orchids was borne to us on the slight breeze that stirred the fetor of the place into miasmatic activity. I heard monkeys chattering. I heard coughing sounds, as though great cats were prowling about us, waiting for an unwary someone to leave the safety of the fire. I didn't know of any great cats hereabouts, but . . .

AND that was it; there was so much of the utterly unknown here, suggested if not seen, but I didn't blame anyone for being jittery. Bad water, bad food, poisonous snakes, strange noises such as none of us had ever heard before, had conspired to break down our morale. My men had become gaunt skeletons, this past week, and I had lost thirty pounds off a frame that stood six feet two in bare feet and weighed two hundred pounds normally.

Yet the tougher the going, the more insistent I was on proceeding.

"There'll be cobras in the ravine ahead," said Lauriston grimly, "and in the dark. . . ."

We didn't care about cobras, really. It was that distant, all-encompassing music which got us, memory of the tales we had heard, the mystery of the disappearance of Jubal Kelly. And something else—a tale of fabulous riches that would have caused the mouth of Midas to water; riches guarded by . . .

But that made me think of the two pairs of green eyes in the dark, of two creatures we had not been able to see—two creatures which were sometimes so close together that they made one think of one creature, with four eyes, all in a row.

"This is the last dash," I said, as all of us got to our feet, tightened our belts, looked to our rifles and automatics, "so we won't carry any duffel. We'll find all we need when we get where that music is, if we do. If we don't, we won't need what we're leaving here."

It was like last instructions to a forlorn hope, a suicidal rear-guard detachment. And I knew that none of the other three expected to get through alive. For myself I resolved grimly, savagely, foolishly, that I would live to see what it was that made the music, caused the green eyes to shine—and what the ritual was that caused the natives of Samar to avoid this section of the island as though Hell itself were here.

II

I THINK all of us knew that if we stayed beside that fire none of us would be alive when morning came. I was the only one who looked back, after we had gone far enough up the ravine to be out of the light, and our eyes accustomed to the darkness. Our fire had vanished, snuffed out like the lives of our men, like the fact of Jubal Kelly.

Something, or somebody, had slipped out of the darkness and blanketed that fire! Why? I hadn't the slightest idea. A symbol, I supposed, indicating that our lives were as uncertain as that fire had been.

Louder and louder sounded the strange drumming of the pestles. In Formosa, six

months before, that pestle-drumming had invited everyone to a Tayal dance. Here it invited . . . to what?

And a white woman! Stories, wild in the extreme, told of a white woman of such ravishing beauty, and such malignancy, that men were struck dumb and sightless on encountering her? I didn't really believe it. There were too many such stories in the far, dangerous places of the earth. There was always a white woman, priestess to black, yellow, brown or piebald savages. Such things just didn't happen. And yet, when I thought of such a woman, and fancied her as young, my heart took up a strange hammering, oddly in tune with that eerie pestle-tamping.

I was leading our march up the ravine, feeling my way with feet and hands, following the sound of a brook that rumbled down from the mysterious reaches of the ravine. Lauriston brought up the rear, taking that position without being told. I stared ahead, seeing nothing, traveling almost by instinct, feeling the sound of the pestle-tamping grow in both my ears, knowing its origin had to be ahead, because it wasn't behind us.

I saw the green eyes. Two pairs of them suddenly appeared in the darkness, directly ahead of me. The eyes of two great-cats. They made no sound, but involuntarily I halted, and the men behind me ran into me and into one another. A low cry came from Rowley, who must have looked past me and seen those eyes—the eyes which had signaled the disappearance of Jubal Kelly.

I threw down on them with my automatic, but they were gone. We had fired at those eyes innumerable times during the past week, but always they were gone a split second before our weapons spoke. I heard no sound, even of bodies eeling through the underbrush on either side of the ravine.

I flung myself forward, hoping that one of the cats would jump me so that a fight to the death, even against such odds, would relieve the strain under which all of us were threatening to break. I stumbled and fell. My foot had caught on a root across the dim hint of a path. I got to my feet swiftly, hearing a hiss that suggested snake, and jumped back. Nothing happened. I thought I heard a snake

crawl away, but my imagination, heightened by circumstances as well as by fever, may have tricked me.

I moved on cautiously, hearing my men behind me. They were following me by sound. Occasionally a hand touched my back, and I knew that Rowley would never lose contact, just as Caswell Jode would remain in contact by occasionally touching Rowley.

"Ross! Ross, for the love of Mike!"

I stopped again. "What is it?" I asked.

"Pete Lauriston," came the voice of Jode. "He hasn't touched me since you saw the eyes! I don't hear him behind me! Pete! Pete!"

But there was no answer. Again the eyes had signaled the disappearance of one of my men.

"I'm going back," I said. "You two stand here, back to back, and don't move until I join you! I'm going back for Peter Lauriston. If you hear me scream, use your own judgment."

I walked back past them. I followed the trail back into the darkness until I was ready to shriek with terror. Something had happened to Lauriston. I'd find his body, bloated from snake-bite, or—

I found nothing. I gave up when I had almost reached our campsite. That I was vulnerable to attack from all sides I knew very well, but somehow I believed in a hunch that was growing in me—that I would live to see the solution of this mystery of Samar.

NOTHING happened to me, nothing struck at me, no hot hands clutched at my neck out of the dark as I started the torturous return. I smelled nothing, heard nothing—and that fact was more terrifying than even the eyes had been, or what the eyes suggested.

I suddenly realized, after I had panted swiftly back along the trail, that I was covering new territory. I understood that I had passed the spot where I had left Rowley and Jode. I couldn't have missed them. They wouldn't have gone ahead, wouldn't have left the spot on which I had posted them.

They had vanished, just as Jubal Kelly had vanished, and Peter Lauriston!

There was a triumphant overtone now

to the pestle-stamping. The sound seemed to shout at me:

"Enjoy yourself, Ross Thomen! Walk into any one of many traps. You're a prisoner already, doomed as your men are doomed; they are in our hands!"

But who were *they*? I could imagine Taos, Tagalogs, Ifagaos, Moros, Visayans, but who could imagine Kmers, when civilized man had never seen one? The world held no single representative of that mysterious race that had vanished as though consumed by fire from heaven, or hell.

The march into the unknown continued.

I was through with questions. I was going ahead until I found the right answers, or else until something happened to me and I could go no further.

Louder, wilder, more exultant, sounded the pestles. I could, in the eye of my mind, see people of a strange, awesome race, standing around an area of flat rocks of different sizes, raising and lowering the wooden pestles, hammering out that eerie music which meant nothing to anybody on this island, except the people I had not yet seen, but believed now, most certainly, existed.

I panted like a spent runner. I did not pause for rest. Branches lashed me mercilessly across the face. A branch caught in the trigger-guard of my rifle, and snatched it from me as though it had been a hand that had taken it. I fumbled around, trying to find the limb, and regain the rifle. But I found no limb, nor did I hear the rifle strike the ground.

In that spine-tingling moment I knew someone had been close enough to me to snatch that rifle out of my hands!

I still had my automatic. The temptation to start shooting at shadows until the gun was empty was almost more than I could resist. My teeth chattered, my spine crawled, but I did not tighten my trigger-finger enough to fire off the piece.

I gritted my teeth, audibly, and pushed on.

Louder and louder sounded the music of the pestle-tampers. The trail turned suddenly and I saw a dull glow of light against the wall of the ravine. It curved further and my feet came in contact with what felt exactly like pavement! I had

walked, years ago, through Ankgor-Vat, and the feel of its ancient masonry underfoot had been just like this!

My back hair bristled. Suddenly, there ahead of me, in a patch of moonlight, I saw . . .

A tiger! Explanation for one pair of green eyes. I saw that it wore a collar, black against its coat. My throat went shut as I raised my automatic. I never fired. I went down under a surge of bodies. In my ears, keeping time to the eerie music, sounded a crazy chattering, in a tongue I had never heard before—then one long exultant cry.

I WAS in the hands of a strange people. I knew that my friends were also in their hands, for as I battled against my captors I heard cries in English. Part of the pile atop me shifted and I got a look at a human face, and that face almost made my heart stop beating. It was a white man's face, but it was a face of strange, terrifying beauty. Never before had I thought of a man as beautiful. These men, garbed in brightly colored cloth which was wrapped around them diagonally from head to foot, like over-size sarongs, were fully six feet tall. Their hair was the color of gold, their eyes blue as the deep sea.

They were men of tremendous physical power. Their biceps stood out hugely as they fought to hold me. There were arm-bands of gold, set with sparkling gems that made my mouth water. There were anklets of gold, also.

I managed to get in two shots with my automatic before a hand knocked it away from me. I knew that my bullets went into the hearts of two of my antagonists, for I saw blood ooze from the holes. Yet they did not fall.

They put their hands over the wounds, turned majestically and walked out of the area of light. As they went others moved to their sides, to support their staggering steps. I thought I could guess why; they were not supposed to die in this place. I saw an altar, a hideous altar, and could guess at things I could not really know. Why men shot in the body, for instance, could move out of the sacred area by sheer effort of will.

I fought out with fists, and feet. I

bit and scratched. I drove a left deep into the belly of one of the Kmers. I had never delivered such a hard blow in my life, and have it produce less effect. My fist sank to the wrist in that belly, then seemed to drive back into my shoulder, as though the midriff of the enemy was resilient, like hard rubber. No fighter could have trained himself to be so hard.

It was little wonder then that I actually feared to become a living prisoner in their hands.

A slap against the side of my face almost tore the head from my shoulders. The world spun crazily. The ground rose and fell. The rocks of the ancient ruins seemed to undulate, like heat waves across the horizon.

"Ross! Ross!" High and shrill came the voice. I recognized it as that of Jubal Kelly. "Don't let them take you alive. I've been in their hands for days and nights now. It's plain Hell, beyond any conception of Hell . . ."

Somewhere yonder Jubal Kelly was warning me. I heard nothing from any other of my comrades, and fancied that they must be unconscious, or prisoners in some dungeon.

In the end I was a prisoner, tightly held erect, two Kmers on either side of me. Hard hands held my wrists. I looked dazedly about me. The whole end of the ravine, which here formed a great amphitheater, was covered by an ancient ruin, oddly resembling the Roman Coliseum. I saw openings into the ruins and knew that they led to dwellings of the Kmers, under the mountain which, for all I knew, had no name. There must have been two hundred people here, all men, all "beautiful," all huge, commanding, grim and terrible.

There was a stir among them. All eyes were turned on one section of what looked to be a tier of seats for giants, in the side of the hill. There I saw an unusually large opening, closest of all of them to the altar. As I stared at it, feeling the attention of all of them focus on it, a man came out. Evil came with him, though of them all he was the most "beautiful" to look at. Fully six feet eight inches in height, he wore a white garment, like a toga, and there was a

strange sort of crown on his head. It was of gold, set with brilliants, like the brilliants in the armbands and anklets of the others. But there was an emblem in the front of the crown, projecting above the circlet, that was new to me. Sight of it caused me to shudder.

III

A LOW murmur ran through the ranks of the Kmers. They bobbed oddly, in unison, and I knew that they had half-curtsied to the man. Then a murmur of voices:

"Agar! Agar! Agar Cwy Ye!"

I had no doubt, from the man's subsequent actions, that he was the high priest; for after looking regally out over the crowd a moment he turned and strode majestically up nine short steps to the altar, which began to glow with a reddish malevolence. There, just behind the altar, he stood, his arms folded, looking straight to the front, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, waiting.

Another murmur arose, and in this were reverence, awe, fear—fear beyond any fear I could find words to express. And out of the tunnel came a girl of perhaps nineteen years of age, robed in white, a garment which clung to her figure. There was a tiara on her head. Her head was thrown back, and curls the color of spun gold dropped to her shoulders. There were golden sandals on her feet. Her face was even whiter than the startlingly white faces of the Kmers—white with a glowing tinge of crimson on the cheeks.

In her right hand the girl-woman carried a short, curved knife. In her left hand she held two leashes which in turn held in check two magnificent tigers! How did tigers happen to be here? I didn't know, at the moment didn't care. I was held spellbound by a suggestion of power which literally flowed from the woman. Again the Kmers cried out, murmuring, like a chant, a mantram:

"Osta! Osta! Cwy Ye Ta!"

The first would be her name, of course. The rest of the cry meant nothing to me, "ta" were some vague inheritance from the Chinese, mandarin, word meaning "great."

The priest turned slowly now toward the young priestess. As he did so all the Kmers dropped to their knees, bent forward and touched their foreheads to the ancient cobblestones of the old city. I dropped to my knees, too, not because I wished to, but because hard hands forced me down. Osta came forward, but she did not turn toward the altar just yet. I felt that she was obeying the telepathic command of the man-priest when she paused for a moment, then came down the steps, into an aisle opened for her by the kneeling Kmers, and marched straight toward me.

The tigers pulled at their leashes, as though they were helping her solemn steps. The eyes of Agar followed her. The Kmers' chant rose softly. That white face was toward me. I could see the eyes which did not appear to blink. I knew that I was looking at a somnambulist, a victim of some strange hypnosis, a woman who did whatever she did under a compulsion I could never understand. She stopped before me, spoke softly:

"Look up, Ross Thomen! Look at Osta and tremble!"

English! But there was no miracle in this fact, I was sure. Down the years many people who spoke English, and perhaps all the other modern tongues, must have followed the fabled story of the Kmers of Samar, into this ravine. And from them this Osta must have learned something of many tongues.

Now I saw the knife at close hand, and there were stains on it. From it came a faint, indefinable odor. . . .

I looked up. I met the baleful gaze of a pair of eyes that were not blue at all, but as green as the eyes of her pet tigers. As our eyes met and held there was the faintest sound of breath's intake. I thought I saw a piteous appeal.

Then she turned away, and my strongest urge was to fling myself at her, clutch at her throat, twist the life out of her. For as she marched toward the altar, her two beasts leading the way for her, three strong men came from the right, bearing a struggling, bound figure between them.

They placed the figure on the altar.

The mouth was gagged. The eyes were blindfolded. The legs and arms were tightly thonged. But I knew the shape of that magnificent body, the bright red of Jubal Kelly's hair. Save for shorts he was naked, and fighting his captors to the last. But they placed him upon the altar on his back and, with other ropes, like a straight-jacket, they secured him there. Then the priest made passes over Kelly with both his hands, stepped back and gave place to Osta. She had slipped the leashes of the tigers, and the terrible animals now sat on their haunches, one at either end of the altar.

O STA lifted both her hands toward the night skies, as though she were offering some sort of invocation. Her right hand held that curved knife. The shape of it suggested the ultimate horror.

I could stand it no longer. I started a fight again with my captors, realizing even as I did so that by my actions I was desecrating this bloody, pagan sanctuary. But I didn't care, for a wild, impossible idea had come to me. By it I might save the rest of my men, if they were still alive, as well as myself. If I could force them to carry me to the altar, as I was. . . .

I took a terrific beating in the next two minutes. My nose was bashed in, my ears califlowered. I felt as though sledgehammers had caved in my ribs. And all the time Osta held her stance, and Agar looked grimly out across the altar at the area of discord.

Finally, I could take no more, must face the fact that I was helpless. So many hands held me that I could scarcely breathe, to say nothing of fighting. Then did Osta go on with her dreadful job.

I won't go too much into detail. That curved blade had a grim and dreadful purpose, a gruesome reason for being curved. For with it Osta probed under the short ribs of Jubal Kelly, while his body went rigid with pain, until she had an opening in his torso. Then, with that opening, she probed—with such skill and speed that I knew she had done this countless times before—for the heart of Jubal Kelly. Having found its principal muscle with the curve of the blade, she severed the heart and pulled it forth.

She held the dripping horror up for all to see. Blood fell back upon the body of Jubal Kelly. My fevered, starting eyes saw the heart jump in her hand, as though it were still beating with the life that had been Jubal Kelly's.

Then I carried out the rest of my plan. I couldn't have saved Kelly. The fact that I knew this from the beginning, however, has never made me cease regretting that I didn't somehow find a way—though I knew there was no way.

Why I wished to be next on the altar, I could not say for certain. Maybe I didn't wish to be the last, and so see my three companions go ahead of me, as Jubal Kelly had gone. Maybe. . . .

But no, I had had an idea—flashed to me by something I had seen in the eyes of Osta.

I sagged against the hands which held me. A cry came from Agar, a command to my warders. I was jerked to my feet, dragged forward. I managed to twist, as I was being pulled along, so that I could see Osta. She was standing with her hands folded now, and Agar was motioning to my warders. I heard oaths from different places in the eerie half-light, and knew that Lauriston, Rowley and Jode were somewhere near, watching what was happening to me.

With all my will I relaxed against my warders. To them I must have seemed unconscious, or numb with the terror caused by what I had seen. That the other Kmers were in ecstasy I could tell by the feeling of exaltation which flowed over me as I was hauled forward along that aisle where Osta had just walked.

So I was taken to the altar, from which the body of Jubal Kelly had been carried by servants of the altar. To what or whom was that altar dedicated? Not to the sun, for it was after midnight. I tried to guess where the priestess had been looking in the heavens when she had offered up that horrible, silent mantram. A bright star showed almost directly overhead. I did not know its name. I knew only that the Taos referred to it as "Mu." Whether its name had anything to do with the fabled lost continent, I did not know.

I had no time to think about it as I was spreadeagled on the altar, and a

razor-sharp knife in the hands of one of the servitors cut away most of my clothing, leaving all of my torso nude. I had unusual chest development and now the horrible idea came to me that because of our lack of food during the past week my midriff sagged so deeply that Osta would have little or no difficulty reaching below my ribs to my heart!

THE face of Agar was grim with fury I had desecrated the grounds. I must pay, and instantly. The god, whatever he was, could not wait, even for me to be bound. Four men stood, at my wrists and ankles, to hold me. Osta, when I was still upon the altar, moved against it, looked down at me.

A faint perfume came from her. Her hands were small, slender, very white. Hands that nature had intended should play among the flowers, not among the entrails of human sacrifices. But even so, their palms were red with the blood of Jubal Kelly—and her soul was probably red with the blood of countless others before him.

Again my eyes met the eyes of green.

With all my will I tried to say something to her. I tried to tell her that I didn't believe for an instant that she did what she was doing because she herself desired it. I tried to let her know that I did not hate her, that I understood her. I smiled at her as though she were the woman I loved. And no man ever smiled with such desperation, knowing his life depended on it. A suggestion of a frown appeared above and between her eyes. There was a question in the depths of green. I thought I heard one of the tigers emit a slight, nervous whine.

I know I heard Agar say something, between set teeth, something with anger in it. I saw Osta stiffen, tremble a little, as with terror. That she was in deadly fear of Agar I was certain. That he was the mind which controlled all this horror, even the horror which was Osta, I was quite sure. I did not know what he said, of course, but I could guess—again from the behavior of Osta.

Now she moved.

She bent over me. I saw that grim curved blade come down. With all my will I tried to remain calm, utterly re-

laxed. My warders would expect the paroxysm when the keen blade touched the flesh of my abdomen, just below the ribs. I could feel them tightening their grip expectantly. Out among the worshippers sounded a weird, triumphant chanting.

Something caused Osta to hesitate, look aside into my face again, draw back a pace. And as she did so the warders relaxed their grip a little, as though the tension were too great for them to bear.

In that instant I moved. With all my power, and with a prayer on my lips for the lives of my surviving friends, and my own, I bunched my muscles and managed to get one hand free of the warders. Swift as a flash I shot my right hand forward. My fingers closed around the soft wrist of Osta, the wrist which held the knife of the curved blade.

I knew I had her, in that instant, even as I twisted her hand so that the inside curve of the blade of the "knife of Mu," was against the artery in her wrist.

Every man there, including the priest, realized what I could do with a mere flick of my own wrist, if I so desired. I could let out the blood and the life of their priestess. They also knew that I wouldn't do it until I knew what was going to happen to my men and myself; knew that I must understand that, once Osta was dead, or mortally wounded, the Kmers would tear me limb from limb.

"Tell them, Osta," I said softly, "to step back, not to interfere with me when I move, or . . ."

She understood. She began to talk swiftly in their tongue, whatever it was. The priest gritted his teeth. The warders gave back. The tigers whined threateningly.

"And keep your cats off me, Osta," I went on. "Much as I like you, I won't hesitate to kill you if anything goes wrong!"

She spoke swiftly again, two words: "*Hellas! Amidan!*"

The cats went silent. I shot my left to Osta's other wrist. I was taking no chances on a second knife. I eased aside, stood beside the altar, close against Osta, oddly thrilled by her nearness. I could feel her trembling, wondered why she should be so feminine, all at once, when

she had been—and must have been for years—a fiend incarnate.

"Now, Osta," I said calmly, "tell this priest of your's to free my friends. Tell him to gather together riches enough to outweigh the body of the man you just sacrificed, that I may take it back to his people. Tell him to tell his followers to give me plenty of room when I am ready to leave."

She spoke swiftly. The priest surged forward. I pressed the blade tightly against her wrist. She uttered a sharp little cry—which thrilled me, because I knew suddenly that it couldn't have hurt her that much! Osta was playing in with me, trying to help! Or did her behavior mean treachery and final undoing?

"They'll kill you when you release or kill me," she said softly.

"They'll have to delay action, then," I retorted, "for I am taking you along! And with this knife ready to do its job every second!"

IV

I SAW a mocking light in the eyes of Agar as he obeyed my commands, given through the mouth of Osta. That he had no intention I should escape I could tell plainly. I was being given a certain amount of rope, that I might hang myself. He knew I wouldn't kill Osta while her being alive could keep my friends and me alive—and, of course, he was right. He must also feel sure that I would kill her when my cause appeared hopeless, even though I would be torn limb from limb afterwards.

It was an eerie stalemate. It would take a week for us to win free of this proscribed area held by the Kmers, to pass over Hell's borderland into sections where the fierce Taos of Samar were the masters. And I wouldn't dare sleep during that time, though I was already close to death from exhaustion. Yet new strength was pouring into me with the knowledge that I had succeeded at least so far, and had a desperate chance for life, and escape, even now.

From one of the tunnels men came forth with ornaments of gold, with baubles of precious stones. These they began to heap upon the cobblestones be-

low the altar. There must have been a touch of mockery in the shape the pile of riches took—the shape of a man lying supine. Agar was taking me grimly literally in thus having the treasure shaped like the man for whom it was to pay.

Now my three men came to me, alone, their eyes alight, their faces grim. But they came unarmed.

“Osta,” I said grimly, “tell your Agar to return their possessions to my men!”

She spoke nervously, swiftly, and in a matter of seconds Rowley, Lauriston and Jode were again armed, and my own automatic reposed in the belt of Lauriston. My men watched every move I made for cues.

“Don’t shoot anybody,” I said to them, “for this priest is ready even now to go berserk, and if one of his followers dies on sacred ground, he’ll explode, even if it means the death of Osta!”

“True,” said Osta. She was not afraid, I was sure of that. She was merely being realistic about it all.

When we were ready, Lauriston said that we should have food, but I was afraid of it. Poison could nullify everything we had so far done. With Osta as hostage, and the tigers padding on ahead of her, we stepped away from the altar, toward the mouth of the ravine, heading out. I couldn’t take my eyes off Osta’s pet tigers. They, undoubtedly, ranged the jungles at night, hunting. In what ghastly arts they had been trained I could only guess.

Osta marched regally. The Kmers surged toward us, but it was only that those behind them were pushing them forward, not that they were actually trying to attack us.

A shrill scream, a tidal wave of what sounded like vituperation, burst from the lips of Agar.

“He’s telling them to attack, even though it means my death!” said Osta. “They won’t do it. They fear me, and the cats, more even than they fear Agar.”

Those were not the exact words, for her English was strange, almost incomprehensible. It was the English of a four-year-old child who speaks a tongue not its own. But the meaning was there, unmistakable.

“They’re likely to do something, when Agar thinks we have a chance to get away,” I told her.

She nodded.

The Kmers made way. I saw them begin to scatter, knew that to right and left, on the rims of the ravine, they would follow us out of their sanctuary, watching their chances to rescue Osta and take us back to be sacrificed. The god of the pagan altar would be chagrined no end if we were to escape. Something of the kind Agar must be telling the Kmers, for Osta was trembling, obviously in terror.

Agar kept on shrieking. He was following us, trying to get his men to attack. Rowley, Lauriston and Jode formed a guard for us, the muzzles of their automatics menacing the Kmers.

“Talk to me as we go, Osta,” I said. “Who are your people?”

“All that are left, I’ve been told, of an ancient, great race. A great land sank beneath the ocean. Only this part of it was left—with my forbears upon it.”

THAT was enough. I could piece some of the rest of it together. The remnants of that ancient race, fearful of the world which had witnessed the loss of millions of their people, had withdrawn into a jungle fastness, where they had survived for ages, building a wall of terror about them through which nothing could penetrate, and return again.

How many times had the natives of Samar been blamed, and visited by punitive expeditions, for the depredations of the Kmers? And how the Taos must hate anything connected with the Kmers! There was something here, if only I could figure it out—the next step in our desperate effort to escape.

“I’m taking you clear out, Osta, back to my own people. You’ll never see your own again, never have to sacrifice on your altar.”

As we moved into the darkness at the head of the ravine, she remained silent for many moments. But she offered no protest.

“I do not care,” she said, finally. “There is no one left alive among us for whom I will sorrow. Since I was very small, I have been ruled by Agar.

Often I have wished to be free of him."

She had been given to the priest when she had been very small, and trained by him in her gruesome art. It wasn't her fault. If she could be taken out, with all she knew of her people with her, to tell to scientists. . . .

But Agar was not going to have it. I heard his screams of rage behind us, whirled. He was charging, with a knife held high, straight at Osta. A cry of fear from the Kmers, but Agar did not hear, nor care. He was raging at Osta, and she was not obeying him. He was going to slay her himself.

I don't know why I did it. But I snapped out the names of the two cats:

"Hellas! Amidan!"

They wouldn't have obeyed me, but almost as though she were a parrot, picking up words, Osta repeated the two names:

"Hellas! Amidan!"

Two gray streaks passed me, one on either side of Osta. I spun Osta around, so that I could see what happened. Agar screamed at the cats, flung one arm across his throat, struck at one of the tigers with his long knife. But the cat eeled under the blow. His mouth closed on the throat of Agar. His fore-claws buried themselves in the breast of Agar. His hindlegs lifted, fastened in the belly of the high priest. . . .

I turned Osta back, urged her forward. I had seen Agar go down, the other cat closing in to help his brother, or his mate.

How would the death of Agar affect the rest of the Kmers? I had no idea, but as we progressed into the ravine I began to understand. They might possibly have been able to let Osta go away from them, if the high priest remained, but with his fall she became more than ever precious to them. They must have a priest or a priestess, to offer up the sacrifices to "Mu."

Osta's life had been saved for the moment, but our way out would be even more dangerous now.

The cats came back past us, taking the lead into the ravine. I heard them lick their chops, smelled the odor of blood on them. Osta gave me no sign that she was disturbed, a fact that

troubled me. Why should she notice blood, and death, when all her life she had dealt in it, with her own hands? And why should it matter to me in the slightest? Osta had no romantic interest for me. She was merely the hostage through whom we hoped to survive.

We were halfway back to our fire, whence we had started our last dash into the fastnesses of the Kmers, when a man made an attempt to get Jode, who strode behind us. I heard Jode's automatic bark savagely. Its echoes rolled and rocked through the ravine, bouncing back and forth between the walls like a rubber ball. I heard a body crash down, roll onto the trail from above, off it below. Jode uttered an expression of grim satisfaction. We continued on.

DAWN found us far beyond the place where some of the minions of Agar had smothered our last fire. We had paused briefly for a bite of food from cans which the Kmers had apparently not understood, had been afraid to carry away. Osta ate gingerly at first, then eagerly, with fingers.

We were approaching the invisible line which, according to the Taos, separated their land from the forbidden, when the Kmers made their first test. They were taking a desperate chance that we would not destroy their priestess. They charged from all sides. We formed a kind of circle, with Osta and her cats inside it—and with me close against Osta, holding the curved knife as I had held it at first—when they came.

Our guns chattered savagely. I saw tall, handsome men crash down before our bullets. But they seemed many as the leaves of the trees. Some of them were crying out to Osta, hoping, I guessed, that she would make a break, get away from us far enough for them to finish their job.

The attack broke, but not before one tall man had got his hands on the neck of Jode—and almost literally torn his head from his body. That he did with two slugs from an automatic .45 in his belly.

We didn't look twice at Jode. There was nothing we could do for him.

The Kmers drew back, but through

the trees we could see them. Some of them were armed with stone clubs, some with slings which were thongs fastened to the ends of throwing sticks.

Lauriston was becoming delirious with fever, but he staggered on, and seemed to know, through his delirium, what was expected of him. Rowley staggered several times, almost went down, but managed to keep his feet, keep on traveling. Osta seemed not to tire at all, and now the tigers were ranging far to right and left, as though to spy out the plans of the Kmers, and bring word of them back to Osta. For often they came back, one at a time, or together, to look up at her with odd little whines, as though they were telling her something.

My heart began to hammer with excitement as we approached the place where our Tao guides had refused to come any further into the land of the Kmers. I realized, then, that by some trick of fate, we had returned by a shorter way, that a dim path had been under our feet since we had left the ravine—and wondered if Osta hadn't somehow contrived to keep us on that path. She was a mystery to me. I couldn't believe that she would so easily desert her people, but there it was. We were back close to "Hell's Borderland" in less than one day, when it had taken a week to penetrate inward to the ravine.

I could fancy Osta, as we came in, ranging these jungles at night, with her two great cats—whose origin I never knew, simply because Osta herself did not know. They had been given to her as cubs by Agar, she told me, when she had been turned over to him for training in the priesthood.

"The people ahead," I said, "will attack your people when they cross a certain line."

She shrugged.

"It is nothing. There has always been warfare between the two peoples."

War and death seemed to be taken for granted by Osta. She simply was not concerned about it. But the Kmers were, for they attacked, the last time, just before we would have crossed that invisible border. This time they came in such force that I knew we were lost, unless. . . .

They were all around us when, loud above the barking of our automatics, I heard the wild screams of Taos. Some of the voices were familiar. Standing guard over Osta, and firing with my free hand, I turned toward the sound—and saw familiar faces, four of them: The faces of our erstwhile guides.

With those four men came scores and hundreds of their fellows, men who lived by war, who exulted in war. Had they forgotten the invisible barrier, or had they seen their enemies for the first time, face to face, now, and realized that they were human, like themselves, and therefore killable?

I didn't know just then, but when I saw the brown horde coming with bolos swinging about fierce heads, I felt that we were safe. For the four guides fought their way through to our side. One of them grinned at me, said:

"The Taos understand that the white devils can be killed. Now is the time for us to be done with them! Much thanks are due to you!"

He stared at Osta, fear and admiration in her eyes. He approached her, put out his hand to touch her. One of the great cats snarled—both had crouched close against us as the attack started—and Osta spoke his name swiftly: "*Helas!*" If she had not, that guide would have been destroyed as Agar had been destroyed.

Then the Taos, including the guides, were in the mist of Kmers, fighting like wild men, like fanatics, trying to cut down as many of them as they could. I saw a tall Kmer lift a mighty Tao in his two hands, high above his head, and bring his body down upon the bowed back of a second man who was swinging a bolo at his midriff. As the knife went home into the Kmer, the body of the Tao struck the killer into the ground, breaking his back.

The three were piled there, quivering, for the force of the impact had also slain the man the Kmer had used as a weapon.

Everywhere I saw Kmers and Taos, locked in mortal combat. The Kmers were outnumbered five to one, but that was not too great odds. The Taos had, apparently, far more efficient weapons, but they didn't matter, either. The great

hands of the Kmers were stronger than any weapons. I never expected to live to see such carnage.

Time after time the Kmers took the offensive, with Osta and the rest of us, as their objective. Time after time the Taos rallied around us, to make sure that the Kmers did not get through. The yells of the fighters were a constant, terrifying din. The heat of the day was ghastly. Steam seemed to rise even from the blood of the fallen.

Time after time the Kmers were driven back. We had all, long since, shot away our ammunition, killing Kmers with almost every shot. Yet time after time the Kmers came close enough to us in their charges that Rowley, Lauriston and I could use our automatics, muzzles and butts, against their skulls.

Time after time hands almost got us, raking the skin from our tortured bodies. But time after time, at the very moment of success, the Kmers would be forced back, more Taos would materialize out of the jungles, and the woods become a greater shambles than before.

Flesh and blood could not stand it. Taos were the world's most fierce fighters—of that I was sure until I saw the Kmers in mortal combat with them. Those Kmers were hideous, horrible, but magnificent. Perhaps, at the last, they forgot why they were fighting; that they wanted their priestess back.

When there was a lull around us, I said as much to Osta. She shook her head:

"Their enemies have seen them, know them to be human. They fight for their lives now, knowing that since their enemies know, they will be hunted down in time, one by one, and slaughtered anyway."

Osta still seemed curiously unmoved. And when, finally, the Kmers were driven back and back, until we could not even hear the sounds of battle, I noticed a curious thing about her. A kind of spell had fallen from her. She talked animatedly, eagerly. She was curious about everything, on the route we were taking back to the east, and a gunboat that was due to pick us up five days hence.

The curious thing I noticed was this:

It seemed that Osta's own personality had somehow been given back to her. The influence of Agar had been lifted from her, though not until hours after his death so malignant and powerful had it been.

She had gone back to the years of her innocence, and had forgotten the years between, when she had been a priestess of Mu! It was merciful that this was so, for I realized more and more that by careful instruction we could bring her up to date; that when we had done so she would be a beautiful, lovable woman.

For myself, however, I would never be able to forget what those lovely hands of hers had done. I could be fatherly toward her, and compassionate, but nothing more.

Which was lucky for me. For by the time we reached the coast Lauriston drew me aside and said sheepishly:

"You haven't got a yen for Osta, have you, Ross?"

I shook my head.

"Good!" he said. "After all, I saw her before you did!"

Lauriston loved her. Later, aboard the ship that came for us, I watched wonder and delight grow on the face of gorgeous Osta, as she discovered something within herself, when she was with Lauriston, which made her so happy she could scarcely speak. I thought that even the cats looked on with pleasure, watching the courtship. It was good that she had forgotten so much.

Later, in Manila, word came through to us—secret word, in order that no official investigation be made—that the Kmers were at last really extinct. I shrugged, deciding not to make too detailed a report.

As far as finances went, the expedition had been something of a failure. Not until we were aboard the gunboat did any of us realize that we had come away without bringing with us, Jubal Kelly's weight in gold and precious stones.

But when I watched Lauriston and Osta together, I felt amply paid, even for the loss of my comrades. And there were always more expeditions, that could be led by a lonely man.



THE HANGTREE HARDCASE

By Art Lawson

A ragged rope dangled from the cottonwood. Wild Jack Brennan's brother had dangled from it, and Wild Jack's escape had been hair-thin. Yet it was back to the hangtree that he rode when the jail gate yawned.

CHICO CITY was holding a funeral when Wild Jack Brennan rode past Boothill forking a lean blue roan. He could see the hearse, its black paint

chipped and gray in the late afternoon light, the two mustangs pawing in the harness while the parson preached. He could see the little knots of people around

the grave, but it was too far away for Wild Jack to recognize the mourners and he was not curious enough to ride closer.

It was all the same to him if a funeral welcomed him after six years absence. As far as he was concerned, it was just as good as a brass band.

He jogged on, past the outlying shacks into the heart of town and stopped at the blacksmith shop. There he looked up into the wide branches of the great cottonwood that shaded the dark little building. A loop of gray, tattered rope still clung to the biggest branch. Jack saw it and cursed.

Then he became aware of movement in the shop. An old-timer, gray as the building, powerful in shoulder and arm, limped from the shadows on a game leg.

"Back again," the oldster mused. "Looking just as wild as ever. If only you didn't have such a good memory, Jack, maybe you could shake off that wild look."

Jack's blue eyes were bitter. He nodded toward that ragged bit of rope high in the cottonwood.

"Looks like the boys left a reminder up there," he said, "in case my memory did slip."

The old-timer shrugged his great shoulders. "What's done is done, Jack," he said. "Now get off that hoss. I got a bottle of old Lightnin' that's been waiting your return. Time we bit the neck off it."

"Are you telling me you want to drink with the gent you helped railroad to jail?" Jack asked, an odd quirk coming to his lips.

Limpy Small's answer was soft. "I didn't help railroad you. I was only on the jury. You done well to get off as easy as you did. Damned near killed a deputy. If the D. A. had been smart enough to prove you helped your brother rustle them cows there might of been two pieces of rope up that tree. Now come down here and beg my pardon for that crack or I'll pull you off that hoss you probably stole and beat the sawdust out of you. Come on."

Jack grinned and slipped from the saddle. A good six feet not counting his high-heeled cowboy boots, he towered over the little blacksmith. Jack held out his hand; the skin was gray, faintly tinged

with brown from half a dozen days of sunlight. Limpy Small took Jack's big fist in his.

"Hell, Limpy," Jack said. "Guess seeing that rope got me going again. If it hadn't been for you on that jury they would have hanged me higher'n Haman. Now where's that bottle of Lightning?"

Limpy led him into his cubby, scratched a light and touched the match to the blackened wick of an oil lamp. From a litter of papers in one corner Limpy found the dusty bottle. He poured two drinks, three fingers high.

"To the sunlight," Jack toasted. "To the feel of wet grass underfoot, and the smell of hosses and cows. To the stars, and the trails that go a thousand miles without a wall to stop a feller or a screw to beat the hell out of you. To freedom, Limpy."

Limpy clicked his glass against Jack's.

"To freedom, Jack. May you have it some day."

Jack's eyes narrowed. Limpy looked straight at them. They drank.

HOOFs pounded on the floor of the blacksmith shop and heavy wheels creaked. Limpy glanced up.

"I better tend to this," he said. "The hearse."

He went out. Jack poured himself a second drink and stood holding it in his hand as he stared at the flickering flame of the lamp. He stood motionless, listening to the sound of horses being put away, to the stamping of mustangs unused to pulling hearses. A man's voice yelled: "Don't forget the meeting at the Palace!" Then a girl's voice came clear as a bell over the racket and Jack Brennan's heart jumped and his knuckles turned white against the brown liquor in the glass.

His eyes flashed to the closed door that shut off the shop. The girl's voice came again, and this time Jack heard what she said.

"I could see him from the hill. I know it was him. Nobody else rides like that. If he's here . . ."

"He ain't here," Limpy answered. "I ain't seen him. He's likely still in the pen at Huntsville. He got ten years—not six."

"I want to see for myself," the girl

insisted. "You'd let me in there if you weren't hiding something."

"Now, Sally—" Limpy began—"You're only excited. The funeral—and all that . . ."

Jack stepped to the door and pulled it open, and stood with the lamplight making his broad-shouldered, narrow-hipped body a black cut-out in the doorway. Limpy was by the anvil, holding a lantern in one hand. The girl, in black Stetson, black riding habit and boots, stared straight at him, her wide eyes shadowed.

"I knew it!" she whispered.

"Evening," Wild Jack said softly. "Looking for me?"

Limpy Small turned then, moved aside so that there was a clear way between Jack Brennan and the girl. He held the lantern stiffly. He licked his lips.

"Now—this ain't the time or place—" the blacksmith began.

"I knew it was you," the girl broke in, staring straight at Jack. "I couldn't miss it. Even after these years you ride as if you owned the world. I knew all the time it was you, even if I couldn't believe you'd have the nerve to ride by in the middle of the funeral."

"Why not?" Jack shrugged. "It wasn't my funeral. It was just as good a time as any to come home."

The paleness in the girl's face was suffused with a warm glow.

"No—it wasn't your funeral." Her voice caught and then broke.

Limpy Small put a strong hand on her shoulder.

"Now—now—" He was trying to make peace. "You're tired, kid. You better—"

Jack said: "In a second, Limpy. I got to say first." The girl was beginning to tremble curiously, but Jack did not notice it. He went on quickly. "Thanks for your letters, Sally," he said. "Thank your old man, too, for his note telling me to keep off this range. Tell him I'm back—and I'm staying. Tell him that rope he tied around my brother's neck is still hanging from the cottonwood. Tell him the range he bought at the sheriff's sale after I went to jail is still growing grass and feeding cows, his cows. Tell him I'm going to change all that before I leave."

His voice dwindled off. "Okay—" he added—"that's all."

The girl's eyes never wavered.

"Sorry," she said, "I can't tell him."

Her voice dwindled into a monotone. "He died of that bullet you put in his back when you got out of jail." She stopped, and the silence was heavy for a moment. When she spoke again her voice was so low the words could hardly be heard. "Too bad you didn't go to the funeral, Jack. It might have given you practice for your own."

So quickly did she move then, Jack had no change to dodge. Her mouth set hard, her eyes flashed, and a gun began bucking in her hand.

The first shot smashed high into Jack's shoulder, sent him spinning against the wall and down to the floor. The second shot bit the doorframe right where Jack's heart would have been if he hadn't fallen.

Then Limpy Small knocked the gun from Sally's hand. Jack shook his head. The girl was fighting like a wildcat. Outside, leather heels were pounding, and spurs were ringing on the boardwalk leading from the Palace Saloon.

"For God's sake, Jack," Limpy panted. "Beat it. They been holding a meeting at the Palace—organizing a posse to hunt you down for killing Charlie Gilmore."

Jack tried to get to his feet, but his knees would not hold him up . . .

HE sat there on the floor with two guns in his hands. He recognized the first man who plunged into the big doorway of the blacksmith shop and drove him back with bullets that he somehow could not center. It was Pete Benson, a little older, a little heavier, formerly partner of Charlie Gilmore in Chico City's Cattleman's Trust Company, owner of the Palace Saloon, and one of the men who had helped hang Bob Brennan that awful night six years ago. Pete Benson was number two on Jack's list. Number one was already dead. Charlie Gilmore, Sally's father, had been buried that afternoon.

In front of the blacksmith shop Pete Benson was yelling. Inside, Jack still sat on the floor waiting for another victim to show. Limpy was dragging Sally toward his office where she would be safe when the shooting became general. The lan-

tern, the only light in the shop, was sitting and smoking on the anvil over by the far wall.

Wild Jack looked dazedly at it for a second, then placed one shot square on its spreader, smashing the globe and putting out the light. He tried to get up again, found that his knees were stronger now that the shock was ebbing from him. Weaving, he went through the darkness searching for his horse. The roan had been boogered by the gunfire. As Jack climbed onto his back, he suddenly bolted.

Jack could do nothing to stop the horse. The animal was thoroughly terrified and the men outside were firing wildly into the blacksmith shop in the hope that one of their bullets would ricochet and strike their victim. Jack, sick from the pain in his shoulder, could not cling to the saddle as the roan leaped through the great doorway and shied from the hangtree. He felt himself sway, fall against the bole of the cottonwood. Immediately half a dozen men jumped him.

Groggily he tried to fight back. It was a foolish, futile gesture. There were too many of them.

Already one of Pete Benson's men was throwing a rope over the big limb where Bob Brennan had been hanged. He missed, for the limb was too high. Then Benson, himself, took the rope. He tied one of Jack's own sixshooters to one end, heaved hard. The gun arced up, fell over the limb, came slithering down.

They hoisted Jack back onto the roan that someone had caught and started twisting the hangman's knot. Jack could hardly stay in the saddle. Yet he tried to hold himself erect while the wild mob howled for a speech.

Jack could hardly get the words out.

"I wish," he muttered, "that I could take more of you to hell with me."

The loop settled over his neck. Benson pulled it tight and the tough manila ground against Jack's skin.

"The bushwhackin' snake!" someone cried.

The mob moved like a wave toward the hangtree, then was brought up in a silence thick as Missouri River gumbo. The lights of the town shone red on the lovely face of Sally Gilmore who was barring the way, and on the craggy scowl of

Limpy Small. It was the girl's clear voice that broke the silence.

"It was *my* father that he killed!" she cried. "I should have something to say. Take this rope off his neck. We'll lock him up—and give him a trial."

The shotgun in her hand glinted in the uncertain light; and beside her was Limpy Small with two sixshooters in his powerful fists.

"The hell with the girl," someone growled.

The mob swung forward. Then Sally let go with one barrel.

"I'll give you the other," she shouted, louder than the roar of the bigbore shotgun.

Limpy smashed two bullets over the crowd. For a second they held their places; then broke and ran yelling crazily, some of them packing buckshot from Sally's scatter-gun. When the sheriff rode up with a deputy hardly a minute later the crowd was spread all over the town's back alleys.

But they had done their job. Jack's horse had bolted. Jack's feet were nearly a yard from the ground. His head was twisted at a grotesque angle . . .

IT was Sally who cut him down. She let go with the second barrel of her shotgun, ripping the rope to shreds and dropping Jack in a crumpled heap on the ground. They lifted him, held him upright while his head waggled back and forth. When his eyes opened they walked him down to the jail, the sheriff on one side, the deputy on the other, and Limpy Small trailing along behind.

Somewhere along the way Sally Gilmore slipped off into the shadows. At the jail, Pete Benson, poker-faced and easy of manner, was waiting for them.

"I tried to stop them," he lied to the sheriff. "But you know—Charlie was mighty popular. The boys don't like bushwhackers . . ."

The sheriff said nothing. Limpy Small looked at Benson until the banker had to turn away. Then they gave Jack a snort of whisky and called in the sawbones. When the doctor fixed his arm and said he'd only have a sore neck for a couple days, they sat him under a bright light and stood around him. He stared at the

floor, he was too sick to hold his head up.

"Why," Sheriff Slim Martin said suddenly, "did you bushwhack Charlie Gilmore?"

Martin had been one of the older boys in town when Jack was a kid. Now he was tall, thin, about thirty. He looked honest to Jack.

"I had plenty of reason," Jack said after a while. "Gilmore helped hang my brother. Before that he ran off most of our beef. He also helped railroad me to the pen." His blurred eyes flashed. "But I didn't kill him. Somebody beat me to it. I didn't even know he was dead until Sally accused me of the bushwhacking."

"Of course," the sheriff said evenly. "Where were you when he was shot?"

"I don't know where I was," Jack said. "I don't know when he was shot."

The sheriff grunted.

"Yesterday morning sometime."

Jack shook his head. He had been riding leisurely toward Chico City yesterday, taking it easy, letting the sun shine on him, getting the feel of a horse under him.

"You see," Benson broke in. "He might as well admit it. But it won't make any difference. He'll hang whether he confesses or not."

"You can't hang a man on—" Limpy Small began.

Benson's voice cut in sharply: "Sheriff, I'm swearing out a warrant for the arrest of Limpy Small. He hid out Brennan when he knew you were hunting for him."

"You can't do that," Limpy snapped.

"I sure as hell can! You got to arrest him, Sheriff."

The lawman's eyes were bleak. He was not one of Pete Benson's men.

"You knew they were looking for Brennan," the sheriff said to Limpy. "You knew he had gotten out of the pen on parole?" Limpy nodded his head. The sheriff added: "Then we got to lock you up, too. Sorry. Maybe the judge will let you off tomorrow."

The town was coming to life again. Liquor flowed freely in the Palace Saloon. Sounds of barroom speeches drifted down to the sheriff's office. The mob would not lose its victim a second time today.

"If there is a tomorrow," Limpy said.

THEY sat silently in the cell. Limpy sat at one end of the narrow cot. Jack at the other end. Pete Benson had gone back to his saloon. Sheriff Martin had gone down to the Homelike Restaurant for late supper and only his deputy, a man grown old as jailer remained on guard. Neither Jack nor Limpy had spoken a word for over half an hour when Jack said softly:

"Sorry, Limpy. This is no part of your affair. They'll let you out tomorrow. I suppose I got it coming to me. But I didn't kill Gilmore."

"'Course you didn't," Limpy said.

They were quiet a moment. Then Limpy added: "I been thinkin' a bit since Charlie got shot. Benson's in a way to win something by his death. Benson knew you were coming back, and he didn't forget that you threatened to kill Charlie the second you got out of the jug. It suits his purposes to have you in jail. Unless my guesser has gone back on me like my game leg, this is just the last step in a long-range plan he's had ever since he first settled in town."

"It was Charlie that run me out and got my spread," Jack said.

Limpy Small rubbed his forehead with the palms of his powerful hands. He stood up on his twisted legs that had been shattered years ago when an outlaw bronc had fallen on him. They had not been much use to him, those legs, but their very weakness had helped him develop the most powerful arms and shoulders in the county. Years of pounding the anvil had added to their tremendous strength.

He stood listening. The drunken carousal was still going on downtown. In another hour or two it would get out of hand.

"I guess," he said, "it's time for you and me to beat it." He swung back to Jack. "Only stop talking that way about Charlie Gilmore. He's dead. Whatever he did to you was wiped out tonight by his daughter."

Jack stared at his old friend and tried to speak lightly.

"Okay, we'll stop talking about Charlie. I reckon you've had too much excitement today, anyway. The time has come for us to beat it, huh? That's a hot one. Just like we had keys."

"It isn't funny at all," Limpy came back grimly. "I made the bars to this cell. Just like you made the bars to that cell you got your head in. You can bust out if you can think back on how you made them."

Jack sheepishly got to his feet. He held out a hand and when Limpy squeezed it he felt as if the bones were crunching against one another.

"Thought you'd come across," Limpy said. "Now—these bars are one-inch soft iron. Set in a six by six beam. If I ain't gotten delicate—"

He climbed on the bed, listened into the night behind the jail. Then he grabbed two of the bars, one in each of his tremendous fists. The powerful muscles of his arms and back ridged, hard as steel. Jack got up beside him; though he had the strength of an ox he felt puny beside him, and he could not use his left arm at all for the wound in his shoulder.

The bars began to bend.

Limpy stopped to rest while sweat ran blindly into his eyes. His voice became husky:

"Benson made one mistake," he said.

"God—" Jack whispered—"I never thought you had those muscles."

"Neither did Benson," Limpy said.

Then they grasped the bars again, and one in Limpy's right fist bent in the middle like a sapling, and came out of its anchorage with a screaming of wood. Up front, the deputy's heels banked on the floor. He came running.

He could not see his two prisoners in the darkness. Jack fought to steady his voice and stepped down from the bunk.

"We was just jumping on the bed," he said, "for exercise. Then we heard someone out back. Likely they're trying to bushwhack us."

"You going to just set in your office and let them do it?" Limpy asked.

The blacksmith moved to the floor beside Jack, holding the bar in his hand. The deputy had not yet savvied what was up.

"Come back here an' listen," Jack said.

Cautiously the deputy came down the corridor. In front of the cell he stopped just out of reach of Jack's hands.

"I don't hear nothin'," he said.

"They probably quieted down," Jack said. Then he added. "Hear?"

The deputy jerked his head about. At that instant Limpy Small lashed out with the inch-thick bar, reaching through the cell grating. The deputy fell without even making a grunt, and Jack caught him and eased him to the floor.

"Neat," Limpy whispered. "He'll be comin' to in a minute. We better go."

Jack hoisted Limpy up to the small window. Limpy got the other bar out, then climbed through and dropped to the ground. Jack snaked through behind him.

For a moment they hunkered against the back of the jail, listening, each grasping a bent iron bar in his hand. Then they started off into the night.

But they had not gone fifty feet when they stepped right into somebody leading a band of horses through the darkness. There were three horses, all saddled and the person leading them discovered Jack and Limpy immediately. Jack lifted his iron bar. He had gotten so far. Nobody was going to stop him now.

He swung it over his head to crash it down—and then recognized Sally Gilmore . . .

WILD JACK closed his eyes. The heavy bar was already slicing through the air. He could not stop the downward swing of that awful weapon, nor could Sally get out from under it. He could only try to deflect it. But the bar was something alive in his hand, something with a will of its own. He could feel the cushioning effect as it struck. Then it glanced from the girl's shoulder and spun from his hand to hurtle into the brush.

The girl fell sidewise, onto her knees. Jack stumbled over to her, went down beside her, and his arm cradled her to lift her up. Jack could not remember the last time he had touched this girl. He could not keep from saying over and over again:

"Sally—Sally, darling—"

Fumbling, he found her shoulder and discovered that no bones had been broken. The fright and sudden pain of the blow had knocked her out. When she came to again she would be all right except for a nasty bruise.

Limpy was tugging at his shoulder. "What happened, kid. For God's sake—"

"It's okay," Jack whispered. "She'll be fine. Where's that other bar, Limpy? I dropped it somewhere near—"

The scuffle had brought men into the streets. The jailer had come to and was hollering like a crazy man. Men were streaming from the saloons and eating houses, milling around, waiting for someone to lead them. The sheriff had gotten to the jail and Jack could hear him swearing, shouting for men to surround the place.

Jack reacted automatically. He could not leave the girl here for she would have a hard time explaining her part in the jail-break. He could not let her fall into the hands of Pete Benson even if she was the daughter of Charlie Gilmore.

Cautiously now men were coming down the alleyway between the jail and a two-story building next to it. They were swinging lanterns that sent yellow spears of light into the brush back of town. In another second or two they would be on him.

Limpy whispered: "I found that bar—also two hosses. Other one got away."

Jack lifted the girl to his good shoulder and swung onto the back of one of the horses. Much to his amazement he discovered it to be his own skittery blue roan.

He did not hesitate. Just as he was discovered by the sheriff's men, he rolled his spurs. Beside him Limpy did likewise, clinging to the horn with his left hand because his legs did not have the strength to hold on at the first plunge.

That way, side by side, Limpy carrying the iron bars, Jack carrying the girl, they roared off into the night, praying that the mob's bullets would not strike home.

In this they were favored by two things; surprise—and the fact that Pete Benson had passed out too much free whisky tonight. . . .

IT was dawn before they stopped to rest far up on the banks of Big Sandy Creek near a strip of range that once had belonged to Jack Brennan but now belonged to the daughter of the man he had been accused of bushwhacking. An odd trio they made, with Sally and Jack each

carrying an arm in a sling, with Limpy sitting in the sand and talking to them like a dutch uncle.

"You two got to give up your feud," he started his speech. "What if Charlie was in on your brother's hanging bee? He was doing what he thought right. The way things have turned out I'll bet my last dollar he never rustled a cow off your range, Jack. He never knew anything about it. And you, Sally, you got to get over the notion that Jack shot your old man. He wouldn't even shoot a snake in the back."

Sally studied old Limpy as he talked, and Jack studied her. She had lost her black Stetson in the scrap last night and her yellow hair cascaded down over her black jacket like a crown of pure gold. She was bone tired, but there was still plenty of fight in those blue eyes and rounded chin. Once she looked away from Limpy, straight into Jack Brennan's face, and Jack's eyes snapped from her to Limpy as if he had been stung.

"At least you can call it a truce," Limpy went on. "The score's even. One dead on each side. Sally shot you, Jack, then saved you from a hanging. You nearly killed Sally with that iron bar, then carried her away from the jail-break."

"Okay," Jack said after a while.

Sally was slower in answering. Finally she said:

"I'll call it off, too—but only if Jack goes away and never comes back again. I'm having trouble enough—and now that Pop—" Her voice caught. She said: "Well—I'm going home. Nobody wants me for anything. They didn't see me last night."

"You can go home," Limpy said, "but not until you tell me just what Pete Benson's interests are in your properties."

"He's executor of Pop's estate," she said broodingly. "They were partners in the bank. I owe him over twenty thousand dollars, money he borrowed when he bought Jack's place. But I don't have it even if I do own half the bank. It's crazy—all mixed up. Benson says I'll have to liquidate my holdings to pay up that twenty thousand and a lot more money I owe the bank, too."

The girl stopped talking and stared off into the hills that were blue in the dis-

tance. Jack trifled with a bit of grass, trying to understand all the undercurrents of what she had been saying.

Gradually this whole affair was making a picture to him. Pete Benson was slowly getting the entire county under his thumb. Apparently his last step had been to bushwhack Charlie Gilmore when he had a chance to pass the killing onto Jack. This would give him control of the Circle G as soon as Sally paid up her father's debts.

Sally stood up, shaking the sand from her skirt.

"I'm leaving now," she said. "You two better drift. I won't tell anybody I saw you." When she was on her horse, she added: "I'll bring out a cayuse for you, Limpy, tomorrow. Maybe some food and blankets. See you on Wild Horse Butte." Her eyes blinked. "Good-bye!" and she rode away, straight in the saddle.

They watched her go. When she had vanished over a knoll Limpy turned to Jack.

"There's a girl," he said, "who knows how to fight. You drifting on, Jack? I ain't wanted for nothing but jail break. They can't give me more than a week or so for that. I'm going back. Reckon I'll tell 'em you made me let you out and then kidnaped me. That'll let me off fine. But you—you better drift."

Jack kicked the sand with the toe of his boot.

"Listen here, you old wart hog," he said. "I just got home yesterday. I ain't drifting today."

"Okay," Limpy said, "if you're hanging around, I'm hanging around. If you wasn't a damn fool, you'd light a shuck for parts unknown."

"I am a damn fool," Jack said. "Climb up on that horse, Limpy. I'll walk. We got to find a better hideout."

Limpy pulled himself into the saddle. Together they headed into the wild, broken country of Wild Horse Butte. . . .

JACK did not keep his engagement with Sally Gilmore the following day. He was on the Butte before dawn, but when he sighted the girl riding along leading a second horse, he also saw that she was being shadowed. Pete Benson was taking no chances. Probably he had found the

hat she lost and suspected she was in touch with the fugitives.

Nor was Jack taking chances. He slipped onto the roan, out down the back side of the butte and followed the man who was following Sally. The only weapon he had was the twisted iron bar from the jail. When Sally dismounted on top of the butte and the Benson man stopped to watch, Jack dropped from the saddle and crept forward afoot through the mesquite.

It was ticklish, delicate work, but almost half an hour later Jack was within five feet of the man who was too busy watching Sally to keep an eye on his own backtrail. Jack stood behind him with his iron bar in his big fist. In a very low, steady voice, he said:

"Lookin' for me, Pancho?"

The man whirled, drawing his gun in one smooth movement. Jack stepped in, smashing down with the bar. Probably the only thing that saved him was the strangeness of his weapon. Expecting guns, the Mexican killer in Benson's employ was surprised by the iron bar. He tried to jump away and its tip crashed into his wrist, smashing the bones, knocking the gun spinning. Jack followed up the wild attack with a kick to the shins that sent Pancho tripping over the mesquite. Then Jack reached swiftly for the man's gun. The feel of it was good in his hands, and he held it pointed directly for Pancho's heart.

"Now," Jack said, "loosen your belt and drop the other gun." As Pancho did so, Jack added: "Kick it over my way." Pancho kicked it. Jack buckled it around his own waist. "Now," he said, "tell me why you were following Miss Sally—tell me straight, or I'll take this iron rod and bust every bone in your stinking body."

Pancho tried to edge away. Jack shifted the gun to his left hand though he knew his wounded shoulder would prevent him from shooting accurately. He picked up the bar again, stood over the gunman, his feet wide and solidly planted.

"You going to tell me?"

Pancho cringed. "We figgered she knew where you were. We found her hat near the jail—and—"

"Then why wasn't one of the sheriff's men along?" Jack snapped.

Pancho did not answer. Jack said:

"Benson wanted to be sure there'd be no trial, huh? Well, tell him this, Snake. I was too sick last night to give the sheriff my alibi." A glint of fear came into the man's eyes. Jack took his cue from that and continued with his bluff. "Tell him I've also found someone who saw Charlie murdered. You slipped bad that time, Pancho. If I didn't want you to tell Benson those things I'd kill you right now. I'd bash you to pieces with this bar."

Pancho had never been so frightened in his life as he was now with Wild Jack swinging the terrible bar over him. It seemed as if he was trying to dig himself into the soil the way he cringed back.

"Señor," he gasped. "I didn't have nothing to do with it. I was only there. It was Frank Rice."

"You're lying," Jack snapped. He had never heard of Frank Rice, who must be one of Pete Benson's hired gunnies. But that did not matter, for this Pancho with the shattered wrist and fear of the Devil in his soul had told all that Jack needed to know to fit in the last bits of his puzzle.

He kicked Pancho to his feet, took the bowie knife the killer had down the back of his neck, kept the two guns. Then he took Pancho's horse and told him that he would have to walk back to town to deliver the message to his boss.

"And don't forget it," Jack advised.

He hefted the iron bar, and Pancho started running.

JACK watched Pancho head off across the range, then he rode up to the Butte, leading the stolen horse. Sally had gone, probably frightened off by the sounds of fighting. But Jack had expected that, and he sat his horse in the shelter of the brush and kept his eye on Pancho limping into the distance, clinging to his broken wrist.

Pancho had gone only about a mile, and was hardly more than a dot against the brown grassland, when three horsemen cut out of a gulch and stopped him. Who they were, Jack could not tell. But from their actions he could make a good guess.

He saw Pancho stop, the men half ring-ing him. Then Pancho began to run, zig-zagging crazily. A tiny ball of smoke arose near the head of one of the horses.

Pancho stumbled, fell. Another little cloud drifted into the sky and vanished. And then, sharp and clear, Jack heard the sound of the two gunshots. It seemed strange that he should hear the explosions as the horsemen swung around and rode out of sight.

Jack expected that they would head for the Butte and pick up his trail. The dustcloud, however, drifted across the range in the direction of the Circle G. Puzzling this Jack rode in a round-about way to his hideout. . . .

He told old Limpy Small of what he had done and what he had seen.

"I was sure they'd come hunting me," he ended. "They must have been waiting down there, and sent Pancho on ahead to scout the situation. I thought they would pick up my trail while it was hot."

"You certain they didn't come back?" Limpy asked.

"Damned certain! I hung around there for a long time."

He stood brooding, looking down at Limpy and rolling a smoke. After many minutes Limpy started talking.

"You got to put yourself in the other feller's boots. Get all the facts. Lay 'em out in a row. Here they are." He made a mark in the sandy soil with one bent finger. "Pete Benson's a natural born hog for power. He's been working inside the law for the most part, going out—like rustling your cows and making you think Gilmore done it—when it's pretty safe. But your coming back scared the hell out of him. He ain't got the guts to go with his ambition. He shot Gilmore and passed it on to you. When Pancho fell down on the job, he shot Pancho. The sheriff'll find Pancho and figger you beat him up and shot him. Now, if I was Pete Benson, I'd let the sheriff hunt for you, and go on with the rest of my business."

He paused a moment, his eyes bleak. "This may sound rough, Jack," he said, "but the best piece of business for Pete Benson would be to get rid of Sally while you're still free. You'd have plenty of reason for shooting her, especially if you've gone hog crazy."

He watched the smoke curling up from his cigarette, and Wild Jack stared down at him.

"By God," Jack said, "you figger that's why the boys who killed Pancho rode to Sally's place?"

Limpy nodded. "Could be. Nobody's going to suspect Benson. By that one simple move he'll control the whole county, not only half of it. And you'll be the goat."

Jack said slowly: "Not this time, Limpy. I won't be the goat this time."

He moved toward his horse. Limpy pushed onto his bent legs, hefted one of the guns Jack had gotten from the Mexican. He grunted with satisfaction and fastened the belt around his waist.

"Quite a trick, putting yourself in the other feller's boots," he observed. "Putting myself in yours, I'd say you were going calling on Sally."

"You wouldn't be wrong," Jack said.

Limpy picked up one of the iron bars he had pulled from the jail window.

"We might need this," he said. "Back in Benson's boots again, I'd say some of his men will be hanging around Sally's. Maybe we can do some persuading with this little toy."

THEY had not gone five miles, and the sun was low in the west when they discovered that they were being shadowed again. Limpy, his gray eyes used to the great plains distances, caught a glint of sunlight on metal far behind them.

"Don't pay no attention," he whispered. "At least not yet. If we stop, he'll stop. We better just ride on like we been doing."

"How far away, you reckon?" Jack asked.

"Half a mile—maybe more. Damn it, Pete don't forget a thing. If we had a sheriff with brains like Pete's there wouldn't be no disorder this side of the Mississippi. He must of dropped off one of his boys to cut back and pick up your trail. They ain't taking any sort of a chance on us getting away before they've got us neatly trimmed for the frame they've made."

They rode on in silence. When they passed the opening to a small barranca Jack said:

"I'm slipping off, Limpy. Give me that bar. Keep going."

He went on another fifty feet or so then passed the reins of his roan to Limpy

and stepped from the saddle. He backed away from the trail, worked around into the gulch. In his left hand he held a gun. In his right he gripped the iron bar.

In about a minute he heard the easy trotting of a horse. Here the shadows were deep and long. He edged forward, swinging the bar, and almost immediately the rider came around the bend. In that same instant Jack recognized him as one of the tough boys who had been taking orders from Pete Benson at the hanging party that failed.

"Just hoist your hands," Jack said quietly. He made no gesture with the gun, but swang the bar in a more obvious manner. Even as the rider pulled to a halt and reached for his sixshooter, Jack saw the mounting terror in his eyes.

"Better not," Jack warned. "You saw what I did to Pancho. And I didn't even begin on him."

"Don't, Brennan," he begged. "Don't use that on me. I ain't done nothing."

"You were with Pete Benson this afternoon," Jack said. "You saw Pancho. Get off that horse, or I'll go to work on you."

This gunman could face sixshooters and knives. He was familiar with such weapons. But a twisted bar of iron in the hands of a man who had pulled them from their sockets in a jail window was more terrifying than those other weapons could ever be. And this gunman, like everyone else in Chico City, believed that Jack had yanked out those bars, for Limpy was known to them only as a cripple, a mild man fit only for shoeing horses or making fancy ironwork.

In his nervousness, the Benson man's spurs rattled against the horse's belly, and the animal bolted. Jack whirled the bar around his head, threw it as if it were a boomerang. It took the man in the ribs and kicked him from the saddle. Leaping forward, Jack stood over the gunnie. When the man tried to run, Jack pushed him onto his face, and after that the gunman had no fight at all.

"What's Benson going to do to Miss Sally?" Jack asked quietly.

"I ain't got a thing to do with it," the man gasped. "I didn't want no part of it. I was just following you, that's all."

"They touched her yet?" Jack asked.

"I don't know," the man said. Jack lifted a foot as if he were going to kick him in the ribs the iron bar had broken. The man turned a dead white. His voice was only a harsh whisper. "They're waiting for you. Got the house surrounded. She's all alone with the old Max cook."

Jack said: "Ah—" It was drawn out like the sigh of winter's wind. Then he leaned down, pulled the guns from the man's holsters. "You better drift," he said. "Either way you'll get it. I reckon you ain't forgot what Benson did to Pancho this afternoon."

The man got to his knees, then to his feet, and began to run toward the hills. And Jack, swinging the iron bar in his big fist, ran in the opposite direction until he caught up with Limpy Small. He leaped into the saddle and gave the horse the spurs.

"You had all the answers," he said to Limpy. "Pete Benson's already there."

NEARING the Circle G, they slowed their two horses to a walk. It was heart-breaking, this delay; but if they were heard all would be lost.

It was completely dark now. Down by the banks of Big Sandy Creek the bunkhouse showed no lights. The cowboys were out on roundup. A quarter mile away, up on a knoll that commanded a view of the whole valley, was the great Circle G ranch-house. It was an old building for this part of the country, built like a Nantucket whaler's house with a tower on top and a square catwalk around the roof. Old Gilmore had built it like this because he enjoyed getting up there where he could look for miles over the range he owned.

Lights were shining in the huge main room. But, as Jack and Limpy rode closer they could see no movement or hear any sign of life. Neither were there horses tethered at the hitchrack out front. They circled around to the stables and carriage shed. Here there were soft sounds of horses in their stalls, pawing and munching of hay.

Jack stepped down, tied his mount. Then Limpy came to ground beside him.

"I wonder if that feller was lying to you?" he whispered. "Maybe it's a trap.

Benson is just the kind of skunk who'd think of catching his shadow. Maybe Benson never got here."

Jack bit his lower lip. For a moment he had an almost uncontrollable desire to laugh. This was funny, somehow, despite the bitter tragedy it promised. Six years he had spent building up a wall between himself and this girl so that he could even the score with her father. Now, in less than six days, it was gone. And, for all he knew, she might have been part of this trap that he had ridden into. It could even be that she had led Benson's men to the butte.

But this was no time for debating such subjects. He whispered to Limpy:

"You better trail me. Watch my back. I've got to get inside there and see what's up. This place is too damn quiet."

Limpy touched his arm.

"Take it easy, kid."

Jack grinned. "I can make it. They don't know we're here yet."

He sidled off toward the house. When he was a youngster he had been over here often and knew the place as well as he did his own home. He reached the kitchen, stepped softly inside and listened. Faint sounds came to him. In the sliver of light that showed under an inside door he saw the Mexican cook lying on the floor, bound and gagged.

He moved up beside the fat old woman, knelt down. Beyond this door was the living room. There was only silence in there, and as long as that lasted he felt paralyzed, unable to go any further. He could not even untie the cook until he was sure whether or not the house was deserted. Her explanations might give him away.

Then a husky, broken voice spoke. The tone was low.

"Now, what are you going to do?" It was Sally. "He's not coming here. Suppose the sheriff arrives first?"

Jack heard Pete Benson's laugh.

"We'll wait," Pete said. "I got a dozen men surrounding this place. Nobody can get through without us knowing. In fact, Erennan is already here, with Small, who didn't have sense enough to mind his own business. They came up the road ten minutes ago."

Jack's heart smashed his ribs when he heard that.

Sally said: "I'll scream."

"Go to it," Pete Benson laughed. "You scream and he'll come running. We'd like that very much."

Jack began to feel as if something horrible were crawling on his back. He wondered if there was a man in this kitchen behind him with a knife ready.

"If you don't scream," Benson went on, "that's okay, too. When Brennan is exactly where we want him Joe Peterson's going to shot his gun twice. He's been following Brennan and Small all afternoon—and there ain't a better follower in the state."

Joe Peterson, Jack realized, must be the one he had knocked off the horse at sunset. He must be miles away by now.

But just then two shots rang out.

Jack went through that door so fast it shattered against the wall and hung shredded on its fancy hinges. Directly in front of him was the man he later learned was Frank Rice, Benson's ace gunman. At first Rice was all that Jack saw; and he looked at him through the smoke of a blazing gun. One—two—three; he saw the bullets kick into Rice even as the gunnie fired back through the shadows of death.

One of Rice's slugs caught Jack in the wounded shoulder, spinning him in a sickening haze against the broken door. Jack fought for footing and went down hard. The jolt cleared his head a moment, giving him a view of the rest of the room. On the far side was Pete Benson, partly sheltered by a heavy table, more completely sheltered by Sally Gilmore's body. He was holding her before him, smiling thinly and firing at Jack as coolly as if he were knocking over clay pipes in a shooting gallery. And the girl, staring in wide-eyed fascination, was unable to move from the horror of the whole thing.

Jack felt another bullet kick into him. He remembered later that it did not seem to hurt, that it was more like a big hand holding him against the wall. He did not feel hurried any more, but lifted the gun in his right hand and sighted it carefully, squeezing the trigger slowly.

The bullet hummed past the girl, clipping a lock of her golden hair on its

way, and took Pete Benson on the side of the head to knock him out of sight. After that, Jack did not have a chance to check up on whether that single shot had killed the man, for Pete Benson's gunnies were swarming up the long lawn surrounding the mansion in the valley.

Jack could see them coming in the doors and windows like a flood from hell, and he sat there on the floor and fired at them until his gun was empty. Then he got the other gun in his right hand and emptied that, too.

Then he saw Pete Benson crawling toward him on hands and knees, the blood running down from a deep gash in his head. He saw Limpy Small coming through a window at the far side of the room. Limpy had emptied his guns in the long rush up the lawn but he still carried his bar of twisted iron. Holding it in his great hand and swinging it with all the strength of his powerful shoulders, he waded into the room and drove back that swarm of gunmen, cutting them down as with a gigantic scythe.

It was tremendous, something that the Devil, himself, could not have stopped. The men could not stand against that awful thing. They fled into the night with Limpy hobbling after them. And then Jack was alone again with Sally Gilmore and Pete Benson.

Pete had fallen over on his belly, but had propped himself on one elbow and was lifting his gun in a last desperate effort. Jack saw this and tried to dodge. But the shot got to him first, tumbling him away from the wall. Momentarily paralyzed he felt as if he were bound by steel wires while he lay there and watched Pete twist around to line the sixshooter on the girl. Pete would die here, but Pete would take them all with him.

Then Jack pushed himself up and flung the empty gun as violently as he could, straight for Benson's head.

He never saw that gun connect, for his brain was whirling, and before his eyes was nothing but blackness and pinpoints of scorching light. . . .

THERE was a new rope hanging from the big limb of the tree in front of Limpy Small's blacksmith shop. There was new music coming from the anvil,

the song of it ringing clear through the bright afternoon while Limpy fitted a new pair of shoes to the forehoofs of the blue roan and a blooded chestnut mare.

"Where are you going on your honeymoon?" Limpy asked in a moment of rest while he wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"Dunno," Wild Jack Brennan said. Jack was sitting on a bale of hay near the door. He glanced down on Sally, who was sitting beside him. "I'm against this scheme. Here, I get out of jail, free myself of those bars you were talking about. Then I get me a new set."

"It wasn't my idea," she said. "It was yours. Even if you were kinda feverish while you were getting better at my house. You brought it up; I didn't. I even have witnesses."

"Witnesses again!" Jack said. He tried to look as if he had talked himself into a trap. But never in all his life had there been a more contented expression in his blue eyes. "Then I guess I got to take my needings. How long's the sentence, Sally? You're the judge."

"The sentence," she said a bit grimly, "is until I have to save you from decorating that tree again."

Jack slipped off the bale of hay.

"That might be day after tomorrow," he said. "I ain't taking the chance of losing you that soon. Got an ax, Limpy?"

Limpy fetched him an ax and then went back to his anvil. The ringing song of the hammer was a sweet accompaniment to the song of the ax that was wiping out forever the ugly memories of that hangtree.

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BUSHWHACK RANGE

By J. E. Grinstead

In the Long-O country a pilgrim made his dangerous choice—cows or sheep. But Tip Kelvin, with notions of his own, cut through both deadlines—and faced the whipsaw of crossfire.

A Novelet of Grim Range Feud

YOU smell like sheep to me," sneered Steve Mendell, bully of the Long-O.

"Take a smell of that," snapped Tip

Kelvin, as he drove a hard fist into Steve's face, giving him a good chance to smell it.

Regardless of the blood spurting from



Already, the galloping men had killed the two herders. Tip Kelvin saw them fire the wagon. So intent was he on the tragedy that he didn't see the rider—



Steve Mendell pulled up, his hand gripping his hogleg. "You said last night you were no sheepman," he snarled. "We've caught you with the goods." He fired.

his nose, Steve went for his gun. Tip beat him to the draw.

"Here, you," bellowed Rome Turner, foreman. "This ain't no place for killin'. You'll mess the bunkshack all up. Get outside if you want to sling lead."

"Suits me," smiled Kelvin. "No lousy puncher can accuse me of associating with sheep. I've seen sheepmen that I'd rather associate with than some cow outfits, at that."

"Meaning?" snarled Rome Turner.

"Meaning that I'm going outside," replied Tip, "like you ordered. If any gent in this outfit wants to get out with me, I'd admire to have his company."

Tip turned his back on the outfit, all of whom he now knew to be hostile toward him, and took the three long strides to the door. Then he stopped, because he met old Bent Combs, owner of the Long-O, who had been standing at the door, and had heard the whole quarrel. Combs, a shaggy, rawboned old rancher, with a voice like a bull, roared out: "Hold the deal, here. What are you fellows up to?" He stepped into the bunkhouse.

"Rome invited me outside for a little 'smoke' party," said Tip evenly. "I'm goin' out and wait for whoever wants to join the fun."

Mr. Tip Kelvin was a rather unusual cowpuncher of twenty-four or so. He was about five foot ten, with the build of an athlete. Handsome, as the tanned men of the desert and plains country go, with soft, brown hair, and a pair of level, unflinching gray eyes. He was looking old Bent Combs steadily in the eye.

"Never mind goin' out," snapped the ranchman. "Nobody's goin' out with you. I want to talk to you fellows."

Tip turned coolly back into the big room and sat down on a bunk.

"Now, you fellows listen to me," Combs went on. "You don't have to start gun messes among yourselves. There'll be plenty of gun stuff for you without that. Old Sheep Harmon has busted loose and brought in about a million sheep. I told Sheep when he settled in the foothills, that I didn't want any trouble. Told him I'd be fair, even

if he was a sheepman. I told him that as long as he kept to the foothills and the strip of range west of Arroyo Gorrino, we'd get along. Then I told him that if I ever saw any sheep or sheepherders east of the arroyo, they'd be my meat."

"Shore," said Rome Turner. "I heard you tell him that."

"Well," snarled Combs, "he ain't took his orders. They was plenty range west of the Gorrino and back in the hills for the little bunch of sheep he had, but now he's brung in a million—and they're east of the Gorrino. Of course, they ain't no cow grass for five mile east of the Arroyo Gorrino, but they ain't no sheep grass, neither. Just plain desert sage and greasewood and sand, but after that five miles comes a little grass and then the gramma flats. That's my cow range, and I aim to hold it."

"SHORE you'll hold it," echoed Rome. He was old Bent's chief yesman, while others joined him. Kelvin sat on the bunk in silence. He had been with the Long-O just two weeks, and there were many things about the outfit that he didn't like, beside the bully Steve Mendell.

"Well," snarled Bent, "if we aim to hold that range for Long-O cows, we gotta get on the job. If they's anybody in this outfit that thinks it's against the law to kill sheep or a sheepherder, let him speak up."

The men all looked at Tip Kelvin, for that was the very thing that the quarrel had come up over.

"How big an outfit has this Sheep Harmon got?" Tip asked.

"How big?" snapped Combs. "What the hell has that got to do with it?"

"A good deal," replied Tip, calmly, "If Harmon is just a poor old squatter, with a few sheep and two or three herders, and a big cow outfit like this is going to jump him—"

"I just told you he was bringin' in a million sheep, didn't I?" stormed Combs.

"Yes, but I didn't see the sheep," replied Tip. "What I was going to say was that a one-sided mess like that wouldn't be fair, and I—"

"Oh, I see," sneered Combs. "You're

a sheepman, playin' cowpuncher, huh?"

"No, I'm not," snapped Tip. "I'm as good a cow hand as you've got in your outfit. I never done anything but work cattle in my life. But in Texas, where I'm from, it's not considered necessary for a good cowhand to be a murderer. That's what it would be for a big outfit like this to jump a few shepherders."

Old Bent Combs almost choked with rage. For a full minute he was speechless.

"String him up!" yelled Rome Turner.

"Let's go," shouted Steve. "He's a damn sheepherder and a spy for sheepmen."

"Steady," roared Combs, getting his voice at last. "They won't be any stringing up, but—Tip, you *are* as good a cowhand as I ever had. You can ride 'em as they come, you can rope with the best of 'em, and I reck'n you can work a gun. But even all that don't make a cowhand for me. If you mean that you won't help me protect my range from a lot of stinkin' woolies, you're going and going now. It's up to you."

Tip stooped over, pulled his saddle-roll from under the bunk, and stood up with it in his hand. Bedlam broke loose in the bunkhouse.

"Can the racket," roared Combs. "He's goin' and if any man tries to leave this room until he's gone, I'll drill him. Killin' a sheepman ain't ag'in the law, but killin' a cowhand in yore own house is ag'in the law, and it ain't goin' to happen at the Long-O."

It was dark, but Tip Kelvin roped his own mount, saddled it, tied the roll behind the saddle and rode right out. He had been only two weeks at the Long-O. In his rage, Old Bent forgot to pay him for the time he had worked. Tip wouldn't ask him for it. He had come out of Texas into the desert country of New Mexico. When he landed a job at the Long-O he had one dollar in his pocket. He was now leaving the Long-O with that same lone dollar and no more. He didn't know where he was going, except that he was heading west.

Tip was two miles from the Long-O headquarters when he pulled in to take stock of his situation. What was out

there ahead of him, anyway? Was he running from trouble like a dirty coward? No, not that. He had offered to go outside and shoot it out with Steve, Rome, or anybody else in that lousy Long-O outfit. No, he was not running from trouble, never had, never would.

He was drifting on west, because for the first time in his life he had been fired. From the day he had signed on with the Long-O, Steve Mendell had tried to make trouble with him. He knew the black-browed Steve was a Texan from the way he worked cattle. The bully looked familiar to him, but to save his life he couldn't place the man. The name meant nothing. He might have any old name in that wild, desert country. Tip could think of but one reason for Steve's attitude toward him, and that was that Steve was on the dodge and thought Tip recognized him.

Tip had tried hard to keep out of trouble with Steve, but in the bunkhouse that night, Steve had pushed things a little farther than Tip could stand. Tip Kelvin knew bullies. They're the same the world over. He thought if he called Steve good and hard one time, that would be the end of it. Perhaps it would have been, but old Bent Combs, who hated a sheepman worse than he did short grass and no water, had stopped the fight and fired Tip. At that point, a thought came to Tip. Combs had fired him because he wouldn't agree to help murder defenseless shepherders. Tip was a cowman. He hated sheep as much as any man could. Still a sheepman was a human and to kill one without giving him a chance was murder.

In that moment, Tip Kelvin knew where he was going. He was going first to warn old Sheep Harmon. He pushed on west into that broad, treeless valley that lay between two ranges of mountains, and the west half of which was desert. He didn't know the country very well, but he did know that the Arroyo Gorrino was a gash in the desert, running north and south, about five miles from the foothills on the west side of the valley. He did not know where Harmon's shack was, but he would find it when morning came, warn Harmon, then head on west.

ON through the night, Tip held steadily west, guided by the stars. A little while before daylight he found a crossing on Arroyo Gorrino, and passed to the west side of that freakish gash in the desert. He had gone a mile beyond the arroyo, when his old buckskin stumbled. He heard something snap. The horse recovered and stood trembling, on three feet. Tip was on the ground. An examination showed him the trouble. Both bones in the horse's lower right fore leg were broken. There was only one thing to do. A shot to end the beast's misery. Tip removed his saddle and fired that shot, with a twinge in his heart. Not only was he set afoot in the desert, but he was shooting the only friend he had in that country.

But this was no time to stand still and worry. The sun would be coming up presently. There was no shade and no water until he reached those hills, which were three or four miles to the westward. Discarding chaps and spurs, he placed them with his saddle in a little clump of thorny bushes, which he would be able to locate by the dead horse, and set forward on foot. He hoped to reach Harmon's cabin before the sun got too hot.

Tip came upon the cabin in a fold of the foothills, a little after sunrise, but there was no sign of life about it. He wondered if Bent Combs and his wild riders could have beat him there. That seemed hardly possible. Still, there was no sign of life, no sheep, no wagon or horses about the place. As Tip approached the cabin, a black-and-tan shepherd dog came bounding toward him. He spoke to the dog and it put its hackles down, and trotted at his heels on to the cabin.

The door of the cabin was open, but the place was dark and gloomy.

"Hello, in there," he called.

"Hello," came a gruff voice. "Come in."

Tip entered and when his eyes became accustomed to the gloom, he saw Harmon, the old sheepman, lying on a dirty cot, with a bandage on one leg.

"Are you the man they call Sheep Harmon?" asked Tip.

"Yes, I'm him. What of it?"

"I'm Tip Kelvin, a cowpuncher."

"Huh. Cowpunchers don't usually associate with sheep people. What do you want?"

"What's the trouble with you?" asked Tip, ignoring the gruff tone.

"Carbuncle on my leg. Can't walk a step. Ain't had no fresh water for two days. Got four herders. They're out in the foothills with my flock. Other man took the team and went to the railroad for supplies. He ought to have got back last night, but he didn't. I thought I could make it all right, but yesterday I got plumb down with my head under me."

"I'll fix that," said Tip. He brought water from a spring, then cooked some breakfast.

WHEN the meal was over, Tip said, "Mr. Harmon, how many sheep have you?"

"I had five thousand," replied Harmon. "But I sold two thousand muttons and had only a thousand lambs this year, and I'm short—"

"Did you have an agreement with Bent Combs of the Long-O to keep your sheep west of the Arroyo Gorrino?"

"Yes, and I've kept it to the letter. I've never had a sheep east of it."

"Bent says you're bringing in a million sheep onto the gramma flats.

"Well, it's like this," drawled Harmon. "Somebody else lied to Bent Combs, or else he lied to you. I haven't got any sheep east of Arroyo Gorrino. There's just one thousand sheep over there. They don't belong to me—yet. I contracted for 'em to make up my five thousand. Bought 'em from the Emory boys. Charlie Emory, the oldest one, ain't more than twenty-two, and the youngest one, Bob, is about sixteen. Charlie rode in here four days ago to tell me he got the sheep out on the gramma flats, but he's so clean and square that he won't bring 'em onto my range until I look 'em over, and make sure there's no scab or foot-rot or anything among 'em."

"So that's the way of it," said Tip, musingly.

"Yes, that's the way of it. I couldn't either ride or walk out to the flock, so

I told Charlie to just hold the sheep there a few days until I could look 'em over. If the Long-O jumps them boys, it will be an everlasting disgrace to the cowmen of New Mexico. If they kill any of the Emory boys, it will be just murder, for them boys is farmers and sheep-raisers and not fighters."

"As far as the disgrace is concerned," said Tip, "the Long-O is a disgrace to the name 'cowman,' anyway you take it. As far as those boys are concerned, the Long-O is goin' to jump 'em, as soon as they can get to them. If I—"

"Well, if you feel that way about it," growled Harmon, "looks like you'd be willing to ride out there and tell Charlie to bring them sheep on across the Arroyo Gorrino. You're a cowman. If you don't care anything about a sheepman, looks like you'd want to keep cowmen from disgracing the name more than they have already done."

"I can't ride out there," Tip told him, explaining that he was afoot, "but I'll do my best to walk out there, if you'll tell me where they are."

"Fine!" snapped Harmon. "From here on I'll fight ary damn man on earth that says they ain't no white men among cowhands. The flock's a little south of east from here and five mile the other side of the Arroyo Gorrino. It's a good ten mile and desert about all the way. Take that light canteen and fill it with water. Don't drink it because you want it. Wait until you need it."

Tip unbuckled the belt and took his gun off, then picked up the canteen.

"You better keep yore gun," said Harmon. "You might need it."

"No," replied Tip, "that gun, belt, and cartridges weigh four or five pounds. Certainly, Bent Combs won't let his gang jump an unarmed man. If he would, I wouldn't have a chance, anyway, against the whole outfit. They'd get me, anyhow."

"I reck'n you're right," agreed Harmon.

So, with the scorching morning sun full in his face, Tip Kelvin set out across the desert in an effort to save the lives of three young men who knew not much more about guns than the woolies they herded. Ten miles on foot was a long, weary way for a cowpuncher.

II

BY the time Tip reached Arroyo Gorrino he was parching from the heat of the sun, reflected from the sand. Before crossing the deep gash in the desert, he tried to look out across the desert and locate the camp of the Emory boys, who were holding that flock of sheep somewhere out there on the strip of short grass that lay between the desert and the gramma flats. They must have a wagon. It would be a dry camp, but they would have water barrels.

It was mid-forenoon now, and the glare of the morning sun was no longer in Tip's eyes, but try as he would, he could see no speck out there on the scorching desert. Heat waves were floating and shimmering in the sun. It was the land of the mirage. Wetting his mouth with a little water from the canteen, he crossed the arroyo and fought on across the sandy waste.

It was nearing noon when he stopped again. Thirst was burning him, but he knew that little canteen of water wouldn't last long, and he might miss the sheep camp. They might have moved farther south to be nearer water. They certainly must have moved. If there was a wagon and horses out there, within two miles of him, he could see it on that level, sun-baked floor of the valley. He took a few swallows of water, while the dog stood whining in the shadow of his body. Then he looked down at the dog's red tongue.

"I may need this water, old boy," said Tip, "but here's where I split it with you."

Tip poured a little water in his hand and let the dog lap it. Then he replaced the canteen and strode on across the sand. He had made another mile, and had just picked out what he thought was a man on foot, out there on the range, when a gust of hot wind suddenly cleared the desert haze and he saw clearly two men on foot less than half a mile from him. He also saw a dozen riders storming toward them, and recognized the riders as Long-O men. A moment later he heard the flat, echoless "tack, tack, tack" of guns on the desert. He was too late. The Long-O riders had beat him to the flock, and now, God have mercy on the sheepmen, and he might have added, on himself as well, for they would see him out there.

His first impulse was the natural one, to save his own life. He moved toward a little clump of sage and greasewood. It would make no shade, but if he lay down, it might hide him from the enraged cowmen. He took one step toward it and stopped. No. He had come out there to save the Emory boys. Old Bent Combs had shown a little human characteristic the night before, when he refused to let his men hang Tip for a spy. If he could but get to Combs and explain how the sheep came to be there, he believed Combs would call off the massacre.

Tip staggered on toward the scene of conflict. He had seen no wagon, and now he no longer saw the men on foot. Occasional shots were still being fired, but for most part the men were galloping about with long clubs in their hands. Tip could see them lean from their saddles and strike. He knew what they were doing. They were preparing such a feast for the coyotes and buzzards as that valley had never seen. They were slaughtering a thousand sheep. Already, they had killed or wounded the two herders, and it was now quite likely that Tip's own body would be added to the feast, but he kept steadily on toward that carnival of blood.

Now he saw the wagon, coming up from the South. It had been to the nearest water-hole to fill the barrels. He saw the main body of the Long-O riders storm toward it. Heard the shots that killed Charlie Emory, the eldest of the brothers, then saw the horses go down. Tip stopped in horror. The Long-O riders had found the can of coal oil in the wagon, emptied it over the wagon body, and set fire to it, destroying the wagon and cremating the body of Charlie Emory.

SO horribly intent was Tip on the tragedy that was taking place that he didn't see a lone rider approaching him until he heard the thud of hoofs and looked around. Steve Mendell pulled up within twenty feet of him, his hand gripping his hogleg.

"Well," snarled Steve, with his gun already on Tip, "you wanted to shoot it out with somebody last night. Let's go."

"Sorry, Steve," said Tip. "I haven't got a gun. Lend me one of yours, and I'll match it with you."

"Like hell I'll lend you a gun. I've got you where I want you. I'm goin' to give you what's comin' to a damn, smelly, sheepherder. You said last night you weren't a sheepman. We've caught you with the goods, so that adds 'damn liar' to the rest of yore accomplishments, and—"

"That's enough, Steve," said Tip, steadily. "You aim to kill me. Go ahead and shoot."

"All right, I'll shoot."

Steve whipped up his gun and fired. Tip fell to the ground.

"Now, damn you," snarled Steve, "you got what I aimed to give you. You won't die for a while. You'll have plenty of time to think things over. You'll have time to understand what it means to track Steve Mendell from Texas and try to put the bee on him. Just think that over, when the kiotys begin to gnaw you tonight."

Steve whirled his horse and galloped back toward the rest of the outfit. Tip sat up on the hot sand and watched him. He saw Steve join the others, and then the whole outfit swept away toward the north to see if there were other sheep east of Arroyo Gorrino.

Then Tip turned his attention to his wound. He drew off his right boot and pulled up his trousers. There was a blue hole in the fleshy part of his right calf, and dark, venous blood was oozing from it. From the color of the blood, no artery had been cut. But the small bone in the lower leg had been broken by the bullet.

With the scorching sun beaming down on him, Tip tore strips from his shirt for a bandage. Then he made two pellets of two small pieces of the cloth, placed one in the hole where the bullet had entered and the other where it had passed out. Then he drew the bandage tight around it. That stopped the blood. Whatever else might happen, he knew he must lose no more blood. He was fighting against the desert for his life, and the odds were overwhelming, but he would fight on.

The blood was drumming in his ears now, and his mouth was terribly dry. It was midday, and he couldn't try to crawl on his hands and the sound leg. He had to lie there until late afternoon, perhaps sunset, before he undertook anything. It was nearly ten miles to Harmon's. A long

crawl, but he meant to try it when night came. He had to take some of the water now. He couldn't stand it any longer. He took a few swallows. Fighting the desire to drink all of it, he closed the canteen, and looked about him.

"Come on, old boy," called Tip. "We split this little water, while it lasts."

Again, he poured a little water in his hand and let the dog lap it. After that, Tip crawled to Shep's clump of bushes, but the sun was straight overhead now, and there was no shade for a man in the low shrubbery. Shep burrowed into the bushes again.

For a long time, Tip sat looking at the panting dog, and summing up his situation. It was desperate enough. If the Long-O gang had only left the wagon, with its water barrels, he could crawl to that. But they had done a thorough job. If Shep had sense enough to go home when he was told, he might bring some help, but— No, there was no one to come from Harmon's cabin, unless the man had come in with the wagon. There was a chance that he had come. It would be worth gambling on, if he could get a message to Harmon. But how?

Tip rummaged in his pockets. He found the little stub of pencil that he always carried. Again he went through his pockets. This time he brought out some cigaret papers. Placing one of the small papers on the leg of the boot that he had pulled off, he wrote in small characters:

Leg broke. Can hold out until tonight. Find me just before reaching sheep camp, about ten miles out.

TIP KELVIN.

Tip tore a narrow strip from his shirt, knotted the little note in it, and tied it fast around Shep's neck. The dog took it kindly enough, but when the fancy collar was in place, he failed to respond to Tip's entreaties to go home. Instead, he crawled back into the bushes and lay down, as if he knew what it was like out there on that burning sand, and proposed to wait until it cooled a bit toward night, if he tackled the job at all.

"You got plenty of dog sense, Shep," mused Tip, "but what you need now is man sense, and I can't expect you to have it. Oh, well. Maybe it's better after all. When night comes, you can keep the kiotys

off, while I try to crawl and hop them ten miles."

As the hours dragged on, Tip began to feel feverish inside. Every fibre of his body was screaming for the little water that was left in the canteen. If he could only hold together until nightfall, there was a fighting chance that he could make it back to Harmon's cabin, but if fever struck him, and he went out, it would be all over. It was horrible to think of!

IN that moment of fear, and approaching fever, the flame of ingenuity was lit. The first desert wireless was invented. Taking out his pocket-knife, Tip cut a short stick of the tough greasewood. At one end of the stick was a gnurly knot, that nothing would split. The rest of the stick was fairly smooth. Tip split it up to the knot. Then he duplicated his message on another cigarette paper, and opening the split forced the little paper far up into the edge of the knot.

"All set, now," he said to himself. "It may work. It's pretty cold-blooded, but I got to try it."

Tip drank a little more of the precious water. Then he poured a liberal share of it into his hand, a little at a time, and let the dog lap it. He closed the canteen, and the dog lay down almost against him, hoping, perhaps, that he would get more of the water. Tip picked up the stick and pried open the split until it looked like a long, golden yellow mouth, then let it snap shut about an inch from the end of Shep's shaggy tail bone.

The dog sprang up, whirled and snapped at the terrible thing that was biting him. He didn't reach it, so he took one long spring and stopped to snap again, whirling in circles, and snapping in a frenzy of pain.

"Get out! Go home!" shouted Tip.

That order seemed to click in Shep's brain. At any rate, he lined out for Sheep Harmon's cabin, ten miles away as the crow flies. Tip watched the dog sprint across the desert in great leaps of pain and anguish. Many a time he had seen a group of boys play that cruel trick on a dog, and then watch with jeers and screams of glee as the poor dog ran his heart out to escape the terrible thing that was gripping his tail. There were no jeers and laughter on Tip's lips now. Instead, there was a prayer on

his lips that the good dog would not drop dead of fatigue, in the terrible heat of the desert, before he reached Sheep Harmon's cabin. There was another prayer, that if he did reach the cabin, Harmon would find the note. And still another, that the wagon had come in, or someone had returned to the cabin who could come to him.

Tip forgot even his own misery, as he watched Shep. The dog was now a brown streak on the desert, bounding on toward old Sheep Harmon, his only hope of relief from the terrible thing that was torturing him.

Tip Kelvin fell back on the ground, in the scant shade of the low bushes, panting with excitement and exhaustion. He had shot the last arrow in his quiver of hope. It was a cruel arrow, and only dire necessity had driven him to it. All he could do now was to wait. If he could only keep his head, he would try to hop and crawl toward that cabin when night came. It would be suicide to try it now. He could feel his fever rising. He was burning up inside. He wanted the rest of that water.

What chance had he anyway? If Shep didn't drop dead of exhaustion, he would go to the cabin. But what of it? Would Harmon see the note? If he did, what good would it do? The one scant hope was that Harmon's man had come in with the wagon. If he had come, Harmon could not ride a horse, or even in a wagon. Would the man be willing to come out there and take a chance on the Long-O outfit catching him in cow territory? It was not likely that he would, unless he was an exceptional shepherd.

He shook his fevered brain free from fancies by an effort of will and tried to reason. At the rate Shep was going and allowing for fatigue toward the last, the dog would make the nine miles in a little more than an hour. Then if the man had returned, in another hour he should see him, a speck on the desert.

From then on, Tip tried to measure the lapse of time by the lengthening shadow of the bushes, while he fought off approaching lethargy and prayed for nightfall and its coolness to help him win the battle. Steve Mendell had sentenced him to something a thousand times worse than sudden death.

The shadows of the low bushes crept on

out across the sands. Tip kept his eyes on the horizon until the sun set, but never a speck did he see that might be a wagon or a horseman. Just at sunset, he drained the canteen, but didn't know when he did it. His tortured brain had snapped under pressure and now, as night drew down its purple curtain, he lay by the side of the little clump of bushes, moveless, unconscious of pain or anything else.

The first wolf wail was heard far out on the desert. Soon they'd be out there in packs, snarling over the feast of mutton and the bodies of two of the Emory boys. Charlie Emory's charred body lay where the wagon had burned. After them . . . ?

The hours of night slipped silently by. The Great Dipper, pointing ever faithfully to the pole star, looked coldly down on a young man, as still as if already dead, by the side of a little clump of sage and greasewood. From time to time, as the night breezes touched his face with cooling fingers, he muttered a few words, then lapsed into silence again.

III

OLD SHEP HARMON lay on his cot. The flaming carbuncle on his leg was throbbing with pain. He was wondering what had become of the wandering cowboy, who was white man enough to go to the rescue of three innocent farmer boys who had done no crime, other than driving a thousand sheep across a corner of the Long-O range to deliver them to him. Noon came and passed. He had heard no sound. No bleating of sheep, no cries of herders, as they drove that thousand choice ewes to his range. Between whiles he wondered what had become of his wagon which should have reached the cabin the day before.

It was some time after noon when Shep shot into the cabin and lay exhausted and whining by the side of the cot. Old Sheep reached down with long arms, tore open the clamp, with an oath for any man who would treat his dog like that. Then he saw the note, took it out of the stick, and read it. After that he cursed horribly, but he was not cursing Tip Kelvin. He was cursing the Long-O and the enemies of sheepmen in general.

Harmon had tried to counsel the sheep-

men to be reasonable, just as the cooler-headed cowmen had tried to counsel such fanatics as old Bent Combs, who believed there was no place on earth for a sheepman. But now, lying helpless in his cabin, old Sheep Harmon swore a great oath of vengeance. He didn't know what had happened, but he could guess. Tip Kelvin had not broken his leg walking the level floor of the great valley. He could picture the scene out there, of slaughtered sheep and slain herders.

There had been many, far too many, such cases in that country. He had always insisted that there should be no cause for quarrel between the cowmen and the flockmasters of the country. There was abundant short-grass range in the foothills for sheep that was not cattle range. He had made that agreement with Combs and had kept his part of the compact. If the Emory boys had been murdered, and he now felt sure that they had, he was a fanatical sheepman from there on, with regard for the rights of cowmen. He would try the law and the courts first. If they gave no redress of the wrong, he would organize the sheepmen and take reprisals. A cow could be killed as well as a sheep, and it took no more lead to kill a cowman than it did to kill a sheepman.

It was almost sunset when Bill Rennert drove in with the wagon.

"Hullo, boss," he called from the door. "What's the trouble?"

"Down with my head under me," snapped Harmon, "and just at the wrong time. What kept you so long?"

"Broke an axle, and it took me a day to get it fixed."

"Well, see how almighty quick you can get that stuff out of the wagon. Don't unhitch the team. I want you to go over to the edge of the gramma flats, and—"

"Gramma flats? That's on the Long-O range."

"I know it," snapped Harmon. He told Bill Rennert what he knew and what he suspected.

"Mr. Harmon," said Bill. "You're a good boss, and I'll do most anything you tell me to do, but I can't do that. If them Long-O riders are out gunning for sheepmen, they'll be on the watch, and it would just be suicide to—"

"Bill," interrupted Harmon, "I ain't

never found no fault with you, but— You wouldn't let that young fellow lay out there with a broken leg and die for water, would you?"

"Cowman, ain't he?" asked Bill.

"Yes, he's a cowman, but he's white, clean through! If you won't go by yourself, I'll go with you, leg or no leg. If you won't go with me, I'll go by myself. Unload that wagon. Throw in a lot of bedding and a big keg of water. Fast! Minutes count in a mess like this."

FAR in the night the gorged wolves were silent, and vagrant winds whispered among the sage. Tip Kelvin slept on in his strange oblivion, out there by the clump of bushes. Old Sheep Harmon lay on a pile of bedding in the jolting wagon, looking up at the cold stars and grimacing with the pain of his carbuncle. Shep lay quietly by the side of his master.

"This orta be about ten mile from the cabin," called Bill Rennert, who was standing up driving. He didn't want to go any farther toward those gramma flats than he had to. He stopped the team to listen a moment, then went on: "Dang funny they ain't no wolves howlin' out here tonight. Never seen it this quiet before."

"Been fed so much they can't howl, I reckon," growled Harmon. "Put Shep out and let him look around a bit. You go with him. I'll drive the wagon and follow you."

Something brushing his face woke Tip Kelvin. Then he felt hot breath on his face. Was it a coyote? He put up his hand and felt the shaggy coat of Shep. Good dog. He had come back. The next moment Bill Rennert and old Sheep Harmon were bending over him.

"Here," said Harmon. "Drink some water, then I'll bathe your face. There's plenty in the keg. How do you feel?"

"I'm—I'm all right, I reckon," said Tip, groggily. "I got a busted leg, and—"

"Wait a minute. Take a little shot of this. Maybe it'll clear your head. That's it. Now, can you tell us what happened?"

"Yes, I think so."

A few minutes later, Harmon knew what had happened, and he swore a terrible oath against the Long-O in particular and cowmen in general.

They got Tip into the wagon, and drove on to the scene of carnage. With the assistance of Shep's keen nose they located the two Emory boys who had been killed with the flock. The wolves had preferred mutton, and the bodies were not mangled. Almost a mile from that spot, they found the charred body of Charlie Emory by the wreck of the wagon. Again the wagon trundled back across the Arroyo Gorrino, with its gruesome load of dead and wounded.

Far toward morning, forgetful of his own suffering, old Sheep Harmon cleansed Tip's wound and set the broken bone, saying as he finished: "That bone will knit in a week on a young chap like you, and in a month you won't know it ever happened."

The next morning Bill Rennert buried the three Emory boys in one grave a little way from the cabin. Harmon's leg was a little better, and he hobbled out to the grave. Tip Kelvin, who had spoken but few words, lay on a bunk in deep study, while they were gone.

"Funny lay," growled Bill Rennert to Harmon, as he finished filling the grave. "Here we are burying three sheepmen that cowmen murdered, and at the same time we're nursing a cowman that we don't know anything about. Looks to me—"

"I know something about him," snapped Harmon. "He's white clean to the core, like lots of other cowmen I know. Unless I miss my guess, he'll help us against the Long-O. Bent Combs will think the boy's dead, and if it hadn't been for his sense and Shep's feet, he would be. So, if you happen to talk to anybody, just forget that the boy has ever been here."

HARMON was right. Within ten days the boy could limp to the spring and bring a bucket of water. Bill Rennert had found Tip's saddle and outfit and brought them to the cabin. Then Bill was gone three days on some mysterious journey. He had gone away on horseback. When he returned, he was leading a splendid horse.

"Tip," said Harmon, "you and me haven't talked none about that mess, while you been laid up here, but I want to talk about it now. Things like that can't go on in this country. It's got to come to a showdown between the cowmen and the

sheepmen. If the courts won't punish Bent Combs and his Long-O riders for that cold murder, I'm goin' to organize the sheepmen, and see that they get what's coming to 'em. I'll try the court first."

"Combs just about owns the county officers, don't he?" asked Tip.

"He shore does, but there's things they can't get away with. I ain't worried about the officers. What I want to know about is you."

"Me?"

"I want to know what you aim to do. You're the only eye witness to the crime. Can you swear that Bent Combs himself was in that mess?"

"Yes. I can also make a list of the eleven men who were with him."

"Will you do that for me?"

"Certainly. I've already made the list. Here it is."

"Thank you, Tip. Now, you've been mighty white in this mess. You risked yore life and came very near losing it in an effort to save the Emory boys, but still you are a cowman. Would you go into court and swear to all this?"

Tip nodded his head sadly.

"Mr. Harmon, they'll never let me get into court. Steve Mendell knows I saw the whole thing. He's sure that I'm dead. The moment the Long-O learns that I'm alive, the whole outfit goes gunning for me."

"I done thought about that," said Harmon. "The minute I swear out a complaint against them fellows, charging cold murder, they'll go gunning for me, too. It takes some sand to be decent in this world. I'm going to make the complaint, if I can have you for a witness. If I can't, there's no use. The mess will have to be settled some other way. If such things as that go on, this fine cow and sheep country will be ruined. Will you do it?"

"I'll appear as a witness if I'm alive," said Tip, "but—if I meet Steve Mendell before time for the trial, you either won't have any witness, or Steve won't be tried."

"All right. The whole thing is a gamble, I may not live to see the trial. I've done pretty well with my flocks, and I got a little money. That horse Bill brought in is yours. I'm giving it to you. Will you go with me to San Pablo and back my play when the time comes?"

"Yes, I'm willing to do that, Mr. Harmon. But you won't be safe in San Pablo, if you go there to make a complaint."

"Never mind about me," smiled Harmon. "I'm an old man. If killing me would have stopped the murder of them three fine boys, it would have been a good trade for the country. They call me Sheep Harmon out here. Back in Texas I was known as Harmon Scott, of—"

"No!"

"Yes," smiled Harmon. "It got to where the courts wouldn't back my play. I couldn't stay in Texas without killing a man every time I turned around—or else getting killed. Every thug in the state wanted to get me, so I quit the ranger service, come out here, and went in for sheep. I told a fellow my name was Harmon. They dubbed me Sheep Harmon, and that's that."

"That makes a difference."

"I thought it might," smiled Harmon, as he buckled on a pair of well-worn old forty-fives that had once seen service in the Texas Rangers. "Now, you and me are going to ride some. We'll lay out in the hills tonight, and then in the morning—Well, we'll wait until morning and see."

SAN PABLO was twenty-five miles southeast from Harmon's cabin, across the valley in the foothills, and fifteen miles south of the Long-O. The old sheepman was a familiar figure in San Pablo. He rarely spoke, paid for what he bought, and went about his business.

So, little attention was paid to Harmon when he rode into San Pablo alone early on the morning after his talk with Kelvin. He dismounted from his harness-marked old pony, with its worn and weathered saddle, entered the Two Wings Saloon, and ordered a drink. When he went out, the bartender grinned at a loafer.

"Old Sheep must be goin' to war. He's packin' plenty hardware, and every loop in his belt has a ca'tridge in it."

Harmon left the dingy old dobe saloon and crossed to the courthouse. Sheriff Arch was in the Clerk's office when Harmon entered.

"Hello, Sheep," greeted the Sheriff. "What's on yo're mind now?"

"Little job for you to do," replied Harmon. "Bent Combs and his killers mur-

dered three innocent men out on the gramma flats. As soon as I can swear out a complaint ag'in 'em, you got the job of getting some warrants and putting the murderers in jail. Here's the list of names, Mr. Clerk."

"Wait a minute," said Arch Lane. "Hold the deal. That's a pretty big order you're giving. Murder is a word that ain't used much in this country."

"I'm using it," snapped Harmon. "That's what it was: cold murder and unprovoked. Make out the complaint. I'll sign it and swear to it."

The clerk looked at the list of names, and the sheriff read it over his shoulders.

"Listen, Sheep," said Lane. "That can't be done. There never was a man that could take them fellers."

"You could take a few of 'em, while your cartridges last," said Harmon, calmly. "You're going to take 'em, either dead or alive, or else you are going to have the worst mess this county ever knew."

"Who's that gets took, dead or alive?" came a booming voice from the door. Then Bent Combs walked into the office.

"You, for one," said Harmon, looking Combs coolly in the eye.

Combs went for his gun, but he didn't get anywhere. One of old Sheep Harmon's guns was on him and the other on the sheriff in half the tick of the clock.

"Get your hands up, Bent," snapped Sheep. "Now, Arch, you say this boss killer can't be took. There he is, and if he makes a move, I'm goin' to kill him."

"Hold the deal a minute, Sheep," gasped the sheriff. "I—this ain't regular."

"It's going to be *regular* in just half a minute," said Sheep, "if you haven't got the cuffs on Bent Combs."

THE cuffs were on in plenty of time. Surprised by the calm action of this old shepherd, Sheriff Lane was in a terrible jam. Beads of sweat were standing on Lane's face, as the handcuffs clicked home. Bent's face was hard and cold as granite, and his voice fairly hummed, as he said:

"Arch Lane, you're dyin' for this."

"But—but—" stammered Lane. "Listen, Bent. I can't help it. You see how it is."

"Yes, I see how it is, too plain," snapped Combs. "Why didn't you kill that damned

shepherd, when he mentioned murder in connection with my name. You—"

"Never mind, Bent," said Harmon, calmly. "You can talk in court. Take him out the back way to the jail, Arch. I'm going with you."

When the cell door closed on Bent Combs, he went raving mad.

"He'll cool off," said Harmon.

"No he won't," snapped the sheriff. "You've simply played hell, Sheep."

"No, you have," drawled old Sheep, watching the sheriff's hand creep toward his gun. "Don't do that, Arch, or you'll play it some more. You're in a jam. If you turn Bent loose, he's going to kill you. He's a murderer and eleven of his men are murderers. They're all over at the Wings, I reckon. If you don't take 'em, and put 'em in jail, they'll turn loose a he-bobcat, with claws a foot long, right in this town, and you'll get scratched."

Harmon turned his back on the sheriff and walked coolly away toward his horse. Sheriff Lane stood looking at him in amazement. He knew that the safest thing for him to do at that moment was to shoot old Sheep Harmon in the back, but could he do it? He doubted it. Harmon had said something about a cat.

Old Sheep walked across the street, mounted his horse, and jogged out of town, going west toward home. He didn't go very far. Less than a mile from town, he turned into a deep ravine, where Tip Kelvin waited for him.

"It was just like I told you, Tip," said Harmon. "If you'd gone with me, we would have had a gun mess, maybe both been killed, and nothing done. As it is, Bent is in jail, and Arch Lane is afraid to turn him out. All he can do, now, is to put the others in. They're all there. Soon as they're in jail, they'll set up a yell for a hearing and try to get bond. Your testimony will show that it ain't aailable case, and we'll have 'em where we want 'em, and no war about it."

"Maybe you're right," said Tip, musingly, "but I hate to see that gang go to trial in this county. They'll be turned loose, and—"

"Yes, I think they will," said Harmon, "but if they are, it puts the sheepmen in the clear, and then it'll be war. We've tried to get justice by the orderly process

of the courts. If we can't get it, there is nothing left to us but war, and it'll be rough. Let's jog on back to town now. They can't have a trial without the complaining witnesses, and I don't want to hold up justice."

IV

WHEN Harmon mounted his horse to ride out of San Pablo, Rome Turner and Steve Mendell were standing in the door of the saloon.

"Look," said Steve in a low tone. "Don't you reckon we orta drill that old woolly?"

"I don't know about that," replied Rome, hesitantly. "He ain't on the range. I don't know what Old Man Bent would want to do. He went over to the courthouse. Maybe we better go over and ask him. If he says get mutton, we'll mount and go get him."

Half way across the street, they met the sheriff.

"Hello, Arch," greeted Turner. "Is Old Man Bent at the courthouse?"

"No, he ain't," replied Lane, swallowing hard and wheezing as if he had run a mile. "Say, Rome, I've always been yore friend and a friend to all the Long-O boys. I—"

"Shore you have, Arch," roared Turner. "We're for you, vote for you, root for you, fight for you. What is it? Want some bad ones took?"

"No, it ain't that. I—Aw, hell, fellers, I got to arrest you, and I don't want no trouble about it."

He seemed embarrassed and reluctant about the whole affair.

"Arrest us? What for?"

"Some sheep mess that happened three-four weeks ago."

"Who made the complaint?"

"Sheep Harmon."

"Well, he won't complain any more," snapped Rome Turner. "Where's Old Man Bent?"

"He's—he's in jail."

"What? Are you tryin' to tell me that you, alone and single-handed, slammed old Bent Combs in jail? That's the best joke I've heard in a long time."

"I didn't do it. Sheep Harmon put him in, and—"

"Sheep did? Why the hell didn't you kill Sheep?"

"Sheep Harmon ain't very easy killed," drawled Lane. "I didn't turn Bent out, because he said he was goin' to kill me when he got out."

"Oh, Bent won't do that. He was just hot under the collar. Steve and me will just mount and go get old Sheep. Then when we come back, you turn Bent out, we'll talk to him, and—"

"Nope. Killin' Sheep Harmon won't help none. The complaint has been filed and the warrants issued. The charge of cold murder still stands ag'in you fellows. Sheep Harmon says he can produce an eye witness to the whole mess, and prove that none of the three Emory boys was armed at the time."

Steve Mendell started as if he had been stung. He knew who that eye witness was. He cursed himself now for not finishing the unarmed Tip Kelvin out of hand, instead of crippling him and leaving him to die of torture out there in the desert. In his heart, Steve had been afraid of Tip Kelvin from the start. Steve didn't know how on earth a man with his leg shot apart got out of that desert, but he knew in his cowardly soul that some day he was going to face Tip Kelvin in a showdown, and when he did, Kelvin would owe him no mercy.

"Well," said Rome Turner, "we'll just turn Old Man Bent out and talk the matter over. It's the only chance we got. If Sheep Harmon and his witness were out of the way, we'd be all right."

"If Old Man Bent had let us hang that damn spy, Kelvin, when we wanted to," snarled Steve, "there wouldn't be any of this."

"Well, you said you got him, along with them other shepherders," said Rome.

"I know I did, but— He was the only eye witness there was, and if Sheep's got him for a ace-in-the-hole, he just didn't die, that's all. He just didn't die, out there in the middle of hell, with his leg shot apart."

"Huh," grunted Rome. "This ain't gettin' us anywhere. Let's turn Old Man Bent out of jail and see what happens."

"No!" cried Lane. "I can't do that. Bent has done said he was goin' to drill me as soon as he gets out. You two fellows are under arrest, I tell you."

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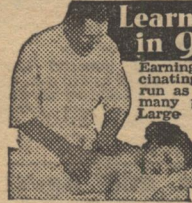
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"Like hell we are," snarled Steve. "It'll
take more than one sheriff to show me the
inside of a jail. I don't count them among
the places of amusement that I like."

Arch Lane belonged to old Bent Combs,
body and soul. Combs had made him sher-
iff, and considered him one of his gang.
When Arch let Sheep Harmon put Combs
in jail, and didn't fire a shot to prevent it,
he put himself in a terrible jam. He knew
Combs, and he knew that the ranchman
was going to kill him the moment he saw
him, after he got out of that jail. He had
to keep Combs in jail, and put the others
in with him, in order to save his own life.

Caught in that sort of a predicament,
Arch Lane made the last great mistake of
his life. His hand whipped to his gun,
just as Rome opened his mouth to try to
reason with him. The next second, Lane
lay on the ground dead, and Rome was
staring at Steve in blank amazement.

"Well, he wouldn't listen to reason," said
Steve coolly as he took the jail keys from
Lane's pocket. "We can't take no chances
with the game standing like it does. We're
in a hole, with that Tip Kelvin alive, and
holding the hand he does. You know as
well as I do that the whole deal was cold.
Not a one of the Emory boys had a gun
on him. If we ever let Sheep and Tip
Kelvin get on a witness stand, all our necks
go. Come on. Don't stand there gaping
like a damn fool. Let's get Bent Combs
out of that jail, and tell him what's hap-
pened and why."

IT was an hour later. The sleepy old
town was as quiet as a country church
yard. There was not even a horse in the
street. The Two Wings saloon was on
the south side of the street, fronting north.
On the east side of the saloon was a vacant
lot, on which stood a considerable grove of
small trees. The Long-O horses were all
standing in that grove, out of sight from
anyone in the street. Released from jail,
Bent Combs had gone to the saloon with
his men. They held a conference on the
situation, and old Bent said:

"Well, fellows, I'm supposed to be a
cowman, and I am one, but I overplayed
my hand in this game. Them weren't Har-
mon's sheep. They were just a flock in
transit, and they crossed only a little cor-

ner of my range. The Emory boys weren't even sheepmen, as we know 'em. Furthermore old Sheep Harmon never broke his agreement with me, and I never heard of his word not being good, in my life. I didn't know Sheep had so much cold nerve, but he put me in jail. If he did, somebody else can put me back, and can put all the rest of you in with me."

"They can't put me in jail," flared Steve.

"Maybe not," drawled old Bent, "but they can fix you so's there won't be any need to put you in."

"Let 'em try it," snarled Steve Mendell. "Arch Lane tried it, and look what happened to him. Me, I don't go to no man's jail. This is a cold showdown. It's you and the men that followed you into that sheep mess, or it's Harmon and that damned spy, Kelvin. In other words, if they win this game, you and such of your men as ain't killed, go to the pen or get hung. We ain't got no defense. One of the biggest ranches in this southwest country goes on the rocks, and one of the biggest ranchmen gets hung for killing a shepherd or two. That'll be something nice to leave to your family, and—

"Shut up, Steve," growled Combs.

"No, I won't shut up. This is our case now, as much as it is yours. If we can win this, only a greasy old sheepman and a dirty spy goes out. Nobody will ever miss either of them, and the whole thing will blow over in a little while. We can get Sheep and Kelvin, easy. Looks to me like you wouldn't have no trouble to decide what you aim to do about it."

"All right, Steve, you win," said Combs. "I never thought I would go quite this far, but it looks like we burnt the bridge behind us. Let's take a drink before we ride. We can pick Sheep up easy enough, as he goes back across the gramma flats. Kelvin will be holed up at Sheep's cabin, or in one of the camps, waiting for a chance to testify against us. Here's how. We may not get another drink for a long while."

TIP KELVIN and Harmon rode into the drowsy old main street of San Pablo. Harmon had just said it looked as if Arch Lane had put the whole gang in jail, or else they had taken fright and left town. They rode to the front of the Two

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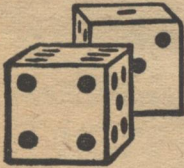
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Wings, meaning to get a drink, and perhaps learn from the bartender what had happened. Tip was already on the ground, and Harmon was just swinging from his saddle when the first shot of the Battle of San Pablo was fired.

Steve Mendell had finished his "last" drink. Stepping to the door, he spotted Sheep swinging down. Tip was out of his line of sight. Without warning, the treacherous Mendell jerked his gun, leaped through the door as his thumb pulled back the hammer.

With the glare of the sun-scorched street in his eyes, the door of the Two Wings looked like the entrance to a dark cave, to Harmon. But that same glare, flashing suddenly in Mendell's eyes, was all that saved Sheep from being drilled, center and final. That, and the fact that Tip heard the ominous click of the hastily cocked forty-five. Tip yelled, Steve's thumb slipped off the hammer, and Sheep dodged jerkily—all on the instant. A bawling scream of pain, as Sheep's nag, a hot slug burning into its rump, buck-jumped away and plunged crazily down the street. Sheep flattened to the ground, rolled swiftly to the side.

Tip flipped up his gun to slam three fast shots at the dark door through which Mendell had dived, seeing Tip with Harmon. One of those hastily fired bullets took Rome Turner, unsuspecting, in the throat. Bone snapped, and the heady Turner toppled to the floor in front of the bar.

Guns spat, and a storm of lead hurtled through the splintering door. Then silence. Tip, running for the corner of the building, stumbled, and fell safely out of sight for the moment behind a rain-barrel. He crawled over cautiously to Harmon. First round of the fight was over. Odds only two to eleven, but Sheep and Tip didn't know that.

Sheep grinned at Tip. "We got 'em in a hole, son," he said.

"If we can keep 'em in there, we have."

"Texican, ain't you?" asked Sheep.

"Right."

"We'll do 'er."

"Get over to the other corner of the saloon quick. They'll try the back way first thing."

"Sold," said Tip.

Slipping under a window, Tip ran swiftly to the swing-doors. Council of war going on hurriedly in there, he guessed. He was right. Catch 'em napping. He crashed in, guns jutting.

"Yah!" he yelled. And snapped a slug. Surprise and luck, perhaps, but it put another out of commission.

As swiftly as he'd burst in, he dove out and away from the door toward the opposite corner of the saloon. That'd worry 'em. And he'd seen Rome down, too.

"Hey, Sheep," he called. "Only ten of 'em left."

"Easy money, boy."

Harmon chuckled.

A spiteful hail of bullets stormed through windows and doors. The Long-O sure was nervous. Tip laughed aloud. Sheep wig-wagged him to go around to the far corner of the saloon where he could watch the back door. Tip went.

But he was wary.

Beneath their bantering the old ranger and Tip knew what they were up against. Their one big advantage was in keeping the Long-O gang cooped and nervous. So far they'd succeeded on surprise tactics. From here on in it would be a matter of grim watchfulness, every shot to count.

Down the street a way a shutter swung shut. Townsfolk taking no part and no chances. A deathly silence settled over the apparently deserted town. Even listening hard, Tip could not hear one clear word of the excited whispering going on inside.

A side window stared up slowly. Tip smashed it with a shot. A man jumped away from the glass crashing down. Tip ran over quickly, fired again.

"Sheep," he shouted, flattening against the wall out of range. "Nine!"

A sudden flurry of shots from up front was his answer. Tip rushed to the street corner of the saloon in time to see Sheep, both guns drumming out a rolling volley, drive a bunch back through the door. One of them lay, jerking spasmodically where Sheep's carefully-placed shot had dropped him. Tip lead-hurled another through the door as he fled.

"Nine, hell," said Sheep. "Seven. And I think I nicked a couple more."

"Like you said. 'Easy money.'"



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INSIDE the Two Wings Saloon, seven hard-case gunmen gathered together at one side of the door. Two were, as Sheep surmised, nicked. Bent Combs, towering, trembling with rage, glowered down at Steve Mendell.

"Well," he snarled. "You started this. What're you doin' about it?"

"I started it! Who told us to kill them kids? Who told us to kill them sheep? Who was planning to rub out Kelvin and Harmon? You, damn you!"

Old Bent Combs glanced quickly about at the ring of grim faces. No mercy there even if he won out for them. Might as well go through those doors, take the punishment he'd so justly earned. He'd take the blame. The rest would be but lightly—acting under orders, unaware of the monstrous height of cruelty in their act. He, Bent Combs, was responsible. Blind rage, rasped to the quick by the fairness of that cowboy waiting out there now to take him the minute he shoved his nose out the door. That's what had driven him to the insane slaughter of three boys innocent of crime. It was his debt. He'd pay it.

His wide shoulders sagged as he looked up, hopelessness glooming his heavy features. "All right, boys," he said. "I done it, like you said. I'm going out there. Give up. They won't jolt you all if I shoulder sole blame. Nobody knows who shot them kids. Well—I done it. You with me? I'm going."

Steve Mendell had damn good reason to keep out of the hands of the law, guilty or not. Bent's folding up like that was no part of his plans. If he could keep those two outside till darkness, he could slide out while they, under Bent's leadership, tried to storm through. Now Bent was throwing the game before it had begun.

Steve took one long stride after the hulking Bent Combs. "You go out there and you take lead, front and back."

Bent's face went white with anger. "Since when do you tell me what to do?"

"Since now!" And Bent found himself staring into the eyes of a man gone mad of desperation, a cornered rat hydrophobia-bait and deadly. Perhaps if he'd given in for the moment, the insanity of fear would have passed. Bent had given in but once in his life, and now he'd fight to see that

his surrender went through. Fear was no part of him.

Facing that drawn and rock-steady gun, facing certain death, he swung up the forty-five dangling in his hand, and let drive. Panther-quick, Steve whirled away from where he stood, firing as he jumped.

"Get him," he yelled. "The damn double-crosser."

Not one of the five stopped to reason. Sixes swung up. Flame leapt, five lances of fire pointing fingers of death at the boss who had, in his way, treated them white. His mountainous figure swayed, unbelief distorting his rugged features. One, two, three steps, stumbling forward, then he crashed to the floor.

Snarling, Steve leaped over him. Pounded three vicious shots into the quivering back. As if stunned, the Long-O hands stepped back, shuffling, sudden hot shame sweeping over them.

AND in that moment of indecision, Tip Kelvin, cowman-outlaw to them, stepped quietly in through the back door. Knowing Combs, knowing Mendell, that roar of angry guns inside had meant but one thing to him: mutiny!

"Disagree about something, boys?" he asked pleasantly. Then he missed the towering Combs. Back to the wall, forty-fives sweeping the circle of momentarily stunned punchers, Tip very much commanded the situation. His quick eyes took in the huddled form at Mendell's feet, the red holes in Combs' back—holes that told their own story. One word spat from his mouth. "Skunk!" And without waiting to call challenge, he pulled trigger. Steve dropped, clawed blindly at the floor, and was still.

"The rest of you—" Tip hesitated. "Sheep!" he called.

Cautiously the door swung open. Sheep Harmon's sturdy shoulder shoved through. He took in the lay. Without a word he walked calmly up to the five remaining, took guns away from them like candy from babies. Leaderless, brainless, butted by the dirty turn of events. Long-O's debt would be paid in full—soon.

"Huh," grunted the old ranger, as he and Tip herded the cowed badmen out the door. "And they call me 'Sheep.'"



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“Dynamic Tension” is an entirely NATURAL method. Only 15 minutes of your spare time daily is enough to show amazing results—and it’s actually fun! “Dynamic Tension” does the work.

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